

# When Love Leads To Scandal

The Townsbridges, Volume 1

Sophie Barnes

Published by Sophie Barnes, 2019.

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WHEN LOVE LEADS TO SCANDAL

**First edition. February 19, 2019.**

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ISBN: 978-1386554479

Written by Sophie Barnes.

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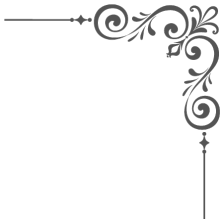
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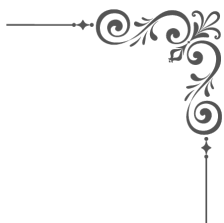
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## **By Sophie Barnes**

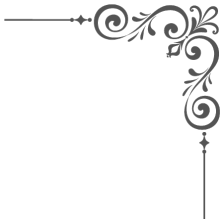
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## Chapter One

*MARCH 1, 1820*

Smoky clouds scurried across the London sky as Charles Townsbridge made his way toward the park. He'd gotten into the habit of going for early morning walks years ago when his sister, Sarah, had acquired her first puppy. Their parents, Viscount and Viscountess Roxley, hadn't known about the stray for quite some time, and since Sarah had feared they'd make her get rid of it if they knew, Charles had offered to help. For the next eight years, he'd taken the dog, who'd been named Mozart, out every morning. Because even when his parents were made aware of Mozart's existence and had allowed him to remain beneath their roof, it turned out that Sarah did not have the necessary discipline required at her young age to care for a dog. As she'd gotten older, she'd become more responsible and had suggested to Charles that she should start taking Mozart out in the mornings. He'd apparently revealed how loath he was to part with the task, for she'd only done it once before tactfully asking him if he'd mind continuing.

It was now two years since Mozart had gone off to meet his maker, and yet Charles could not seem to stop taking his walks. They provided him with an excellent start to the day, he realized. The fresh air and movement filled his limbs with the energy required to get things done.

Crossing Piccadilly, Charles was caught by a swift gust of wind. It tugged at his jacket, pulling it tight across his chest before pressing a kiss of cool air to his cheeks. Drawing the brim of his hat down over his brow, he quickened his steps and entered the park where trees bowed their heads in greeting. He was not the only one who'd decided to come here this early. He never was, even though

the people at this time of day were sparse and oftentimes only visible at a distance.

Turning onto the path to his right, he took the same route as usual: past the flowerbeds, up the hill, and then down across the grass to the lake. A pair of ducks and their ducklings were bobbing on the water when Charles reached the embankment. He stopped to watch, a smile pulling at his lips on account of the fluffy little creatures swimming along behind their parents.

“My bonnet! Please, please, please, stop my bonnet!”

Charles turned in response to the outcry to find a collection of straw, ribbons, and feathers tumbling toward him. Behind it came a young lady, her white muslin skirts hiked up in her hand to reveal her stocking-clad ankles as she raced down the hill in pursuit. An older woman followed on her heels, albeit at a much slower pace.

Determined to help, Charles jogged to the left and caught the straw bonnet right before the wind carried it into the lake. Turning it over in his hand, he straightened the brim and removed a twig and some leaves from the light blue feathers which appeared to be crushed. The ribbons, a slightly darker blue than the feathers, were twisted together, so he untangled them next before fluffing the feathers with his fingers.

“Goodness me,” the young lady panted as she skidded to a halt before him. Her close proximity now allowed him to gauge her age. She did not appear to be more than eighteen. “I scarcely know how to thank you.” She raised her chin with a smile, her blue eyes laughing with quiet amusement. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair undone by the breeze in a way that caused one stray lock to fall in her eye while another trailed over her shoulder. Her mouth, he noted, was a perfect combination of rose-petal pink and strawberry cream.

Charles frowned. He’d never compared a feature to something edible before. More odd was how his heart seemed to be hammering about in his chest. Deciding it had to be due to the effort of catching the droopy accessory, he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

“There’s no need,” he murmured, a little surprised by the low timbre of his voice. “I am happy to have offered assistance.” He handed the item back to her and watched as she returned it to her head, securing it with the ribbons. “I’m also relieved that I caught your bonnet when I did, or I would have been forced to go for a

swim.”

Her eyes widened with obvious dismay. “Oh no. I would never have allowed you to do so.”

Smiling with every intention of putting her at ease, he told her wryly, “When a gentleman sets his mind to helping a lady, stopping him can be a challenge.”

The color in her cheeks deepened, and it occurred to Charles she was blushing, which in turn caused a strange surge of heat to creep under his skin. He cleared his throat and acknowledged the older woman who’d now arrived. She panted loudly and gulped down several large breaths while clutching at the side of her waist with one hand.

Charles addressed her. “I believe a short rest on that bench over there might make you feel better.” Stepping forward, he offered her his arm and saw the look of surprise on the young lady’s face.

A complicated mixture of emotions shot through him, compiled from the pleasure of doing something useful and the knowledge that many of those who belonged to his set would not offer help to a servant. And that was clearly what this woman was – a maid, most likely, charged with acting as chaperone.

He guided her to the bench and helped ease her down onto the seat. “Better?” he inquired. The chaperone nodded. “Try taking a few deep breaths. Slowly. Not so fast.”

She did as he suggested and gradually managed to recover from her exertion. “Thank you, sir. I’m ever so grateful for your assistance.”

“As am I,” the young lady told him. She’d followed him and the older woman over to the bench and was now standing right beside him.

A jolt of awareness shot through Charles, most likely because she was closer than he’d expected. He turned to face her, his eyes meeting hers and...something indescribable tumbled through him, racing along every vein and snapping at each of his nerves. He’d heard his sisters talk about fated romantic encounters and falling in love at first sight and a slew of other fanciful notions that young girls dreamed of. What he hadn’t imagined was that he would ever have cause to wonder if such things were actually possible or if it might one day happen to him.

He did so now, however, for there was something about this woman that sparked his interest. But then the chaperone coughed,



and Charles shook his head. He'd obviously lost his mind. There was no such thing as love at first sight, just physical attraction, which was hardly enough to call for courtship or marriage.

With this in mind, he took a step sideways, adding a bit more distance so as not to have his senses stirred even further by the young lady's scent. It was far too sweet to be ignored and only served to tempt him with possibilities.

So he touched the brim of his hat with his hand and addressed both women. "It has been a pleasure, but I fear I must be going now since my family will be waiting for me to join them for breakfast." What reason was there to linger?

"Do you live far from here?" the young lady asked. Her statement was met with a frown and a firm shake of the head from her chaperone. Realizing her error, the young lady bit her lip. "Forgive me. I am often chastised for being too forward, and since you are obviously a bachelor with no ring on your finger and—."

"My lady," the chaperone told her mistress tersely.

Charles smiled. He could not help it. "No need for apology," he said, then touched the brim of his hat once again. "Indeed, I thank you for brightening my morning." And with that he turned away, making his escape while he was still able – before he did something slightly improper, like give her his card. A gentleman did not offer personal details about himself to a lady with whom he wasn't acquainted. A proper introduction would be required. Most especially when addressing what he believed might be a debutante.



BETHANY WATCHED THE tall, broad-shouldered man she'd just met walk away. He'd been handsome. Not classically so, perhaps, but there had been an air about him, a kindness in his coffee-colored eyes that matched his actions. His nose had been straight, his mouth a wonderful indication of what he was thinking, for it had twitched with amusement and curled with pleasure, more animated than any other mouth she'd ever seen.

She sighed, both with happy contentment and some frustration. She could not afford to like this man so well. Not anymore. Not since yesterday afternoon when the Earl of Langdon had come to speak with her father. The offer he'd made for her hand had been precisely what her parents had hoped for, and since Bethany had quite liked the earl and did not wish to disappoint anyone, she'd

accepted. Even though there had been no spark.

This spark she'd felt only once in her life. About ten minutes ago when she'd met the man who'd rescued her bonnet. It made her wonder if rushing into a proposal before making her debut had been a mistake. But then she dismissed that idea on the basis of practicality. She was an earl's daughter after all, raised to marry for convenience. Not because some man whose name she did not even know made her heart beat faster. To even consider such a prospect would be insane.

With a groan of irritation directed at the fact that she would likely wonder about the stranger by the lake for days to come, no matter the pointlessness of it, she addressed her maid, Ruth, who looked quite a bit better now. "Are you ready to return home?"

Ruth nodded and scooted off the bench. They started walking and as they went, Bethany did her best not to think of how perfectly tailored the gentleman's clothes had been. He had good taste, unlike the dandies, whose choice of clothing she found ridiculous most of the time. And then there was his hair. The dark strands peeking out from beneath the brim of his hat had made him look even more dashing. And—

"My lady," Ruth said, interrupting Bethany's thoughts. "I hope you're not cross with me for reprimanding you slightly in front of the gentleman, but it is my duty to protect you and well, you really ought to know by now that you must not be so forward. Especially not with young men whom you don't know."

"Of course. You were quite correct to speak up. And no, I'm not cross with you for it."

"I'm pleased to hear it." They continued a few more paces before Ruth added, "All things considered, he did appear to be a gentleman of good standing, so there's a chance you'll meet him again this evening at the Roxley ball."

"Not that it matters," Bethany said. She glanced at Ruth. "I am now affianced to the Earl of Langdon. Breaking that engagement for any reason would be difficult, but to do so because of a man whose name I don't even know would be terribly foolish."

"And possibly ruinous, my lady, which is why I would never suggest such a thing."

"Just as I would never consider it," Bethany murmured. "Why would I? After all, I've done what every hopeful debutante dreams of doing. I've made a brilliant match with no effort at all on my

part. I ought to be thrilled.” When Ruth made a *hmm* sound, Bethany amended, “I *am* thrilled.”

She and Langdon, or Robert as he now allowed her to call him, had known each other for weeks. Their conversation was amicable, though perhaps a bit reserved. But he did smile when she spoke and had even laughed in her company on occasion. Oh, and he’d also kissed her, which was something, she supposed. Even though it had not been a life-altering kiss, it had been pleasant enough. Certainly, she decided, she and Langdon could be content with each other. And as she walked and the breeze cooled her skin, she accepted that this would simply have to be enough.



WHEN CHARLES ENTERED the ballroom that evening, he greeted the nearest guests politely then sought out his family. Since his sisters, Athena and Sarah, were still too young to attend such events, they had remained upstairs in their bedchambers for the evening. Instead he found his parents and younger brothers, James and William, scattered about. As hosts, his parents were busy conversing with guests, so he decided to approach James instead.

“Do you know if Robert has arrived yet?” he asked after saying, “Good evening,” to Baron Garret with whom James was speaking.

“I haven’t seen him,” James said, “but he usually tends to arrive late at social events, does he not?”

Charles nodded. His friend was never in a hurry to spend time at balls, for he loathed having to dance, but Charles had hoped he’d make an exception this evening. After all, it was three months since they’d last seen each other. Robert had been away in New York and had only just returned yesterday morning. Charles was eager to hear about his travels.

Excusing himself to James and Garret, Charles went to collect a glass of champagne from the refreshment table. The room was already unbearably hot and clamorous from the mixture of conversation and music that seemed to jab at his ears. Charles glanced at the terrace doors. He’d only just arrived and already longed to escape.

Perhaps just for a moment?

His mother would kill him if she found him hiding away on the terrace when he was supposed to be writing his name on dance cards. He considered the row of wallflowers waiting with hopeful

eyes directed at each passing gentleman and decided he'd dance with them all this evening. But not until he'd had a chance to cool down a little.

Following the periphery of the room, he reached the French doors leading onto the terrace and stepped out into the fresh night air. A sigh of relief escaped him as a welcome breeze glided over his hair. He took an invigorating sip of his drink and moved further away from the ballroom to where the air wasn't hampered by the wide façade of his parents' home.

A lone woman, silhouetted against the dark garden beyond, was standing near the railing. Charles slowed his progress and prepared to retreat to the opposite corner of the terrace so as not to intrude or risk ruining her reputation by being alone with her.

But then she turned as if sensing him there, and Charles's heart stumbled. It was she, the young lady from the lake, with the eyes he'd never forget and the smile that did curious things to his insides.

She stared at him as if he'd arrived from a dream she'd been having, as if she would happily risk losing other belongings if it would provide an excuse for them to see each other again. Which Charles acknowledged was the oddest contemplation he'd ever had when he didn't know one thing about her. Besides the fact that she was curious, forward, and prepared to abandon decorum, at least to sprint after her bonnet.

"I should arrange for a proper introduction," he said, because that was the only thing that seemed to matter right now – discovering who she was and being allowed to ask her to dance.

She parted her lips as if to respond, but then she appeared to register something and the momentary hint of delight he'd glimpsed was instantly brought to an end. Puzzled, Charles failed to notice the approaching footsteps, but then he felt a hand slap his back and he turned to meet Robert's sparkling eyes.

A rough bit of laughter escaped him. "God, it's good to see you again after all this time. I missed our weekly game of billiards."

Robert grinned. "I've much to tell you, my friend, most importantly perhaps, the fact that I've gotten engaged."

Charles stared at the man whom he knew so well and then laughed. "Truly? You must introduce me at once to the marvelous woman who's managed to tempt you with marriage."

Robert beamed. "It would seem you've already met her." He

gestured to the side and Charles followed the movement with the sense that the flame burning bright in his chest was about to be snuffed out forever. The lady from the lake filled his vision, and as he stared into her gorgeous blue eyes, Robert said, "Allow me to present my fiancée, Lady Bethany Andrews."



BETHANY DREW A SHARP breath. Of course she'd agreed with Ruth that there was a chance she would meet the handsome stranger again. What she had not expected was for him to be Robert's friend, Mr. Charles Townsbridge. She managed a smile, though she feared it did not look entirely genuine. During the course of the day, as she'd thought back on her brief encounter with him, she'd managed to convince herself that he wasn't as dashing as she recalled and that the incendiary spark she'd felt in his presence had been a fabrication of her own wild imaginings.

And she'd succeeded, until she'd turned to find him staring back at her. The light in his eyes and the slant of his lips had made her forget, if only briefly, that she would never discover how bright their spark might burn. Best then to stamp it out straight away which, according to Mr. Townsbridge's current expression, had been neatly accomplished the instant Robert had announced she was his.

Surprise had filled Mr. Townsbridge's eyes for a second. The light there had flickered and dimmed before quickly returning, even brighter than before as he offered hasty congratulations to them both. Robert failed to notice the act, but Bethany didn't. She saw the effort Mr. Townsbridge made to pretend he wasn't affected. Perhaps because she too struggled to play the same game.

Nothing had happened between them. They hadn't even touched, except for that brief moment when he'd returned her bonnet. And that bit of contact was hardly reason for her to feel as though she'd done something wrong. And yet, as she stood here right now and faced both Robert and Mr. Townsbridge, guilt grew and expanded inside her. The two men were friends after all. But only one had managed to make her heart beat faster, and it was not the one she'd agreed to spend the rest of her life with.

"Was New York as impressive as you believed it would be?" Mr. Townsbridge asked Robert. He'd schooled his features, making it impossible for Bethany to discern his thoughts any longer.

"Absolutely," Robert replied. "You should go and see it for

yourself one day. There's really no need to travel the world when every culture imaginable is represented in that one city. Here in London, all you hear spoken is English, but over there, there's Italian, German, Spanish...I even saw people who appeared to have come from China. It was most intriguing."

"And did you manage to complete your business?" Mr. Townsbridge asked with interest.

Robert nodded. "I visited the companies in which I plan to invest. All except one show promise." He added a few additional details but kept it brief since discussing such matters in front of a lady was not deemed proper. "Then on my way back to England, I met the Earl of Pratchard and his wife, who'd been visiting family there together with their daughter." He smiled in Bethany's direction. "Being trapped on a ship together for a month allowed us to become better acquainted and, after some consideration, I decided to make her an offer yesterday."

"No wonder I hadn't yet heard of your engagement," Mr. Townsbridge murmured. He took a sip of his drink, his gaze fixed on his friend.

"I plan to announce it this evening," Robert said. "But before I do, there are a few other people I must greet. Can you please entertain Bethany while I do so? She loves to dance, and you've always been better at that than I."

"But she's your fiancée." Mr. Townsbridge's voice was tight, his posture more rigid than one second earlier. "You should be the one dancing with her, Robert. Not I."

Robert sighed. "I know. And I shall. Later. But for now, I would appreciate your help. Bethany hasn't been out in Society before. This is her debut, and you are the only person I trust to keep her safe besides her parents."

"Perhaps we should return her to their company," Mr. Townsbridge suggested, still not looking at her, and talking as if she weren't even there.

Bethany pressed her lips together in annoyance. "I am not a child to be coddled or kept in a box," she said, drawing both men's attention. "If neither of you wish to dance, then I shall simply find someone else who's willing to oblige, which shan't be difficult since my dance card is already half full."

"Let me see." Robert said, extending his hand.

Reluctantly, she handed over the card and watched in dismay as

he crossed out two of her partners. “Mr. Frost is a decent fellow. You may dance with him if you wish, but the others are scoundrels. Charles here will take their places.”

Bethany stared at the man she’d agreed to marry. Would he always manage her like this, reviewing her decisions and vetoing them when he did not agree?

“What about the rest of the dances?” Mr. Townsbridge asked as he peered down at the card Robert still held. “Should you not at least claim the waltz?”

Bethany opened her mouth to speak but Robert cut in. “She does not yet have permission to waltz.” He glanced at the doors leading back inside. “The next dance is starting.” He offered Bethany his arm, and she dutifully placed her hand upon it so he could lead her forward. But as soon as they entered the ballroom, he handed her over to Mr. Townsbridge and quickly excused himself before disappearing into the crowd.

Bethany held on to the arm now resting beneath the palm of her hand in much the same way as she’d done with Robert’s. The only difference was that with Robert she’d felt nothing, while now...a slow pulse beat through her limbs, fanning out until her whole body hummed with awareness. She glanced at Mr. Townsbridge and found his jaw clenched. He was staring at the dance floor as if it were an arena in which he was expected to fight to the death.

“We do not have to do this,” she said, half hoping that he would agree. The other half – the part she had to resist – longed for the experience.

He inhaled, his nostrils flaring as a frown creased his brow. Slowly, he dropped a glance in her direction. His eyes met hers and Bethany sucked in a breath. Even now, looking almost angry, he had the power to make her toes curl and her knees turn to jelly.

“One dance, my lady, possibly two. Because it is Robert’s wish.” And with that declaration he led her forward with elegant poise so that they could take their positions for the country dance about to begin.



CHARLES’S JAW HURT from clenching too tightly. Of all the women in the world, why did Robert have to announce his engagement to the only one who’d caught his own interest?

It would be fine, he told himself as the dancing began and she

stepped toward him. He barely knew her, which meant his attraction was purely physical, and that was something he could easily vanquish.

She placed her hand in his and a jolt of awareness passed through him.

He'd simply find some other woman to whom he could pay his attentions.

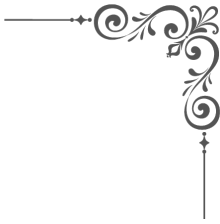
His stomach twisted slightly in response to that thought. At six and twenty he'd already met all the other marriageable women. *But you only just met Lady Bethany*, he reminded himself. *Perhaps there are others who've yet to make themselves known.*

He held on to that hopeful prospect as he guided Lady Bethany between a row of other dancers. If he refrained from meeting her gaze, perhaps he'd forget it was she? The rapid beat of his heart and the way his skin tingled in response to her touch said otherwise.

But no. She was Robert's fiancée for God's sake. They'd known each other for weeks. Had most likely enjoyed a grand romance while crossing the ocean together, kissing each other beneath the stars every night and... He closed his eyes briefly, forcing that thought aside. It was wrong of him to feel jealous. Whatever this was, this fierce attraction, it had to stop. This instant.

He dropped a look in Lady Bethany's direction, prepared to address the issue, only to find himself wondering if he might be the only one feeling this way. After all he knew, she was madly in love with Robert, and Charles was an idiot for imagining there'd ever been a spark between them. The more he thought on that, the more he believed it must be the case. It was, in fact, what he hoped for by the time the dance ended with neither of them having spoken one word to each other. Robert deserved to be happy. He deserved to be loved for the wonderful man he was. And when he and Lady Bethany married, Charles would be thrilled on Robert's behalf, because the alternative would be to pursue his friend's fiancée, and that would be both dishonorable and utterly unthinkable.





## Chapter Two

SIX DAYS HAD PASSED since Bethany met Mr. Townsbridge, and while she'd hoped to spend those days with Robert in a serious effort to establish the same kind of connection she felt with his friend, he'd apparently been too busy. This had not gone unnoticed by Bethany's mother.

"He ought to call on you more often," she declared over breakfast. "During our crossing, he gave the impression that his interest in you went beyond your dowry. He was so attentive as I recall."

"He was on a ship, my dear," Pratchard mumbled while reading the paper. "There was little else to divert him."

Bethany sighed. She believed her father was right and was further convinced of this later in the day when she met Robert at a garden party hosted by the Duke and Duchess of Hollowgate.

"Delightful to see you again," he said, addressing not only her but her parents as well. "You must forgive me for staying away this past week but there's been a lot for me to catch up on after returning to England."

"I understand," Pratchard said. "Perhaps evenings are better than days? We would love to see you for dinner if you can find a vacant spot in your schedule. Your parents are welcome too of course."

"I'll be sure to let them know," Robert said. "Thank you, my lord."

Bethany attempted a smile. "It is my understanding that a new museum displaying Viking artifacts has recently opened just outside London. I'd love to see it one day."

"It sounds intriguing," Robert said. He glanced around and then

suddenly raised his hand in the air as if gesturing for someone's attention.

Bethany sighed. He clearly hadn't gotten her hint. Or perhaps he had and he simply did not wish to spend the day looking at archeological findings with her. Perhaps he no longer saw a reason to romance her now that she'd agreed to marry him. The disheartening thought dampened her spirits and made her want to return home instead of staying.

But then the person Robert had gestured to joined them, and Bethany sucked in a breath. It was him again: Mr. Townsbridge, handsome as ever in a navy blue jacket and fawn-colored breeches. His expression, however, as he glanced at her briefly, was utterly inscrutable. And then he gave his attention to her parents, greeting them both politely and exchanging a few brief comments on the weather, the turnout for the party, and his longstanding friendship with Robert.

"You recall my fiancée, of course," Robert said next, directing Mr. Townsbridge's attention back to Bethany.

"Of course," Mr. Townsbridge murmured, his eyes like burnt umber meeting hers across the distance between them. His expression revealed nothing of what he was thinking, and yet Bethany's pulse leapt with undeniable fervor in response to his gaze.

"Perhaps you'd be good enough to keep her company for a moment while I finish my discussion with Mr. Harlowe?" Robert suggested. He turned to Bethany's parents. "He was apprising me of some land available for sale – a grand opportunity I'd hate to pass up."

Bethany's mother flattened her mouth as if doing her best not to argue. It was clear that she believed any land the earl hoped to purchase could not be of greater importance than spending time with her daughter. For which Bethany only loved her more, even though she was glad that her mother refrained from voicing her thoughts.

"Of course," Bethany's father said with a tilt of his head. "If it's not an inconvenience to you, Mr. Townsbridge?"

All eyes turned to him and Bethany could not help but think that he looked like a rabbit, snared in a trap. "It would be an honor," he said after too long a pause.

"Excellent," Robert declared. "I will see you again soon then."

He walked off quickly, as if their joint agreement supported his inattentiveness.

In Bethany's opinion, it did not. But then again, they had only been back in England a week. Perhaps she was being too hard on Robert.

"Oh look, Henry. Baroness Fintley and her husband are over there," Bethany's mother said. "Shall we go and greet them?"

Pratchard nodded. "Certainly, my dear. It's been far too long since we had them over for dinner and cards." He gave his attention to Bethany. "Care to join us?"

Bethany glanced at Mr. Townsbridge. "Of course," he said. He did not offer Bethany his arm, though he did walk beside her as they followed her parents to where the Fintleys were standing. They were keeping company with another couple who were introduced as Mr. and Mrs. Matthews. Bethany nodded and thanked them politely when they congratulated her on her recent engagement. And then the conversation turned to the prospect of a railway line being built between Stockton and Darlington and the problems caused by the fact that the proposed route would pass over Viscount Barrington's land.

Bethany tried to listen with interest, but since she had no information to add to the conversation and did not care overly much about property rights or the need for additional iron and steel manufacturing, she found her attention wavering. It was far more easily drawn to Mr. Townsbridge, who stood by her side, to the rich scent of sandalwood emanating from his person and how the space between them seemed to be hotter than that between her and anyone else.

Discreetly, she glanced up at him. His tall frame was perfectly poised, his head tilted slightly as if to convey his attention to what her father was now saying. Sunlight spilled across his cheek, adding a handsome glow to his masculine features.

The effect was dazzling, and in spite of herself – even though she knew perfectly well she could not risk showing her interest – she could not make herself look away. The temptation to reach out and touch him, to provoke some reaction from him, turned almost unbearable. How could he stand there so seemingly immune to her, when he made her skin come alive by simply being? It fairly tingled in his presence, reminding her too acutely that any intention she'd had of forgetting about him, of denying the effect he had on her, of

ensuring he never affected her again, was futile.

As if sensing her perusal, he lowered his gaze and stared into her eyes.

Bethany caught her breath on a sharp inhale, and her cheeks grew uncomfortably hot. She glanced away, heart pounding in her throat at the keen realization that Robert would never incite such a visceral reaction from her. With this piece of knowledge came fear and guilt. Robert was a good man, albeit a bit distant and perhaps with other priorities than her at the moment, but he was an excellent match, and even if he weren't, she had accepted his offer of marriage. There could be no regrets since breaking off such a prominent engagement would only end one way: in scandal.

"Would you like a reprieve from this discussion?" Mr. Townsbridge inquired.

His voice was low, intimate, seductive. It curled around her, banishing her better judgment and causing her to nod. "I confess I do not have much interest in the subject."

The edge of his mouth lifted, but before it became a smile, he interrupted the conversation briefly to ask her parents if he had their permission to escort their daughter over to the refreshment table. They agreed and unlike earlier, Mr. Townsbridge offered Bethany his arm.

She placed her hand tentatively upon it and became instantly aware of the hard, well-defined muscle that existed beneath the sleeve of his jacket. Forced to steady herself, she curled her fingers into his arm and sucked in a breath. Butterflies had now taken flight in her belly and her legs felt too weak to stand on, which wasn't normal at all. None of this was.

"What *are* your interests, if not in railroads?" Mr. Townsbridge asked as they started to walk.

*You* was the first thought that came to mind.

Instead, Bethany said, "Houses."

Mr. Townsbridge's eyebrows rose. His eyes widened and his lips parted just enough to convey what could only be described as astonishment. But then, as if he was certain he must have misunderstood her, he schooled his features and nodded. "Of course. Now that you are to be married to the Earl of Langdon," his name was pointedly spoken, "managing large households must be at the front of your mind."

She smiled, because she simply couldn't help it. "That is not

what I mean.” When he frowned at her, she explained, “I enjoy designing them. I’ve many sketches at home, from modest townhouses to grand estates. I’ve even considered building small homes on top of each other for the sake of saving space, though I’m not sure such an idea will ever have much success. But I like exploring different possibilities – especially those no one else has thought of.”

He stared down at her as if she was some sort of curious puzzle no one could solve. And then he said, “You’re quite different from other young ladies.”

She couldn’t help but grin. “I believe it’s my mother’s American influence, Mr. Townsbridge.”

A spark of amusement lit his eyes, causing warmth to seep under her skin. Having reached the refreshment table, she glanced at it and, apparently believing she wanted a drink, he quickly provided her with a glass of lemonade. She thanked him and took a sip, savoring the tartness.

“Do you have plans to sell some of your favorite designs?” Mr. Townsbridge asked. His voice was devoid of all humor, suggesting he meant the question in earnest and not in jest.

Slightly startled that he, an aristocratic gentleman, would take such a dream of hers seriously, Bethany blinked. “I...um...” She took another soothing sip of her drink and tried to meet his gaze directly, only to find that she couldn’t. “I fear that will not be possible.” She attempted a laugh to brush aside her discomfort, but to her chagrin, she produced a miserable sound instead. “Countesses occupy themselves with charity work, watercolors, and embroidery. They do not involve themselves in building houses.”

Mr. Townsbridge didn’t respond. Instead he allowed a moment of silence to fall between them, and then, as if inspired by some sudden thought, he caught her by the elbow and started steering her toward the other end of the garden. “Did Robert tell you that?” There was something in Mr. Townsbridge’s voice, a hint of tightness that caused Bethany to shiver.

She glanced up at him in dismay, not because of his question but because it had not occurred to her until now that she’d never shared this hobby of hers with Robert. “No.” What else could she possibly say?

“So then this preconceived notion of yours is entirely based on what you’ve seen other married ladies of the *ton* do.” His hand fell

away from her elbow and he drew to a halt. She stopped as well and turned to face him. "Why must you share the same mold as them? Why can't you be different?"

Bethany snorted. "Because that is not what most gentlemen want in a wife, Mr. Townsbridge. They wish for the woman they marry to conform to certain rules, not to challenge them or possibly even break them."

"If it were me, I'd prefer originality, and I certainly would not want the lady I marry to conceal herself behind a mask of conventionality." He looked at her directly, his eyes holding hers until she was tempted to avert her gaze. Instead, she boldly looked back, allowing his dark eyes to hold her captive. "I'm sure Robert shares this opinion and that he'll support your dreams if you tell him about them. He's a good man, my lady. I urge you to be open and honest with him, for both your sakes."

As if summoned by their conversation, Robert came to join them. He smiled at Bethany. "I trust my friend here has kept you entertained during my absence?"

"Indeed, he has provided me with excellent company and conversation," Bethany told him.

"And as enjoyable as it has been, I fear I must now depart," Mr. Townsbridge said. He gave his attention to Robert. "Athena's birthday is coming up, and I've yet to buy her a present, but if you'll be at White's tonight, perhaps I'll see you there?"

"Definitely." Robert shook his friend's hand.

Mr. Townsbridge turned to Bethany, touched the brim of his hat while effecting a brief bow. "It's been a pleasure." She barely managed to say, "Likewise," before he was striding away.

"Who's Athena?" she asked Robert once they were alone together.

"Charles's youngest sister." He chuckled and shook his head. "She's quite the hoyden and more outspoken than anyone I've ever met."

"I respect people who speak their minds. It takes tremendous courage."

"Hmm...it can also lead to a heap of trouble. But I actually tend to agree."

Encouraged by this statement, Bethany thought of what Mr. Townsbridge had told her and said, "There's actually something I've been meaning to ask you."

A slight frown appeared on his brow. "What is it?"

Feeling her stomach draw tight as if cinched by a cord, Bethany took a deep breath. "Do you think you might be able to help me sell some architectural drawings I've made?"

His frown deepened. "Architectural drawings?"

"Yes. I've quite a few, though I'll agree that some are better than others."

"What an interesting hobby," he murmured. "I dare say it's rather unique. For a lady, that is. But to sell such pieces for the purpose of having them brought to life would be difficult if not impossible. You'd have to go up against men like John Nash and Robert Smirke, which simply isn't feasible."

"But if I show you my sketches, I'm sure you'll agree that I'm able to match their skill."

"Even so, being an architect is a full-time job. I don't see when you will find the time for it when there will be children for you to raise and a home to manage." He smiled at her as if he had the answer to all her problems – the sort of smile that proved he did not see her at all. "Besides, to let my wife work would be quite bad form. People would talk."

"Of course. I should have considered that."

The edge of his mouth lifted. "It's easy to forget how judgmental Society can be. Making a wrong move is far too easy. I'm glad you mentioned this to me so I could warn you." He offered his arm and she accepted. "From now on, however, I would suggest that you spend your time on something less likely to stir things up. Like playing the piano for instance."

Bethany forced back a groan and let him escort her to her parents. Her life with Robert was apparently destined to be a typical Society marriage. It ought not surprise her. This was after all what she'd been raised to expect. But as the day wore on and she realized how much of herself she'd be forced to give up, she pictured Mr. Townsbridge's face and couldn't help asking herself if life with him might be better.



CHARLES STARED DOWN at the ivory colored wedding invitation embossed with Robert's and Bethany's names. While he'd met Robert frequently over the past three and a half weeks since the garden party, he'd managed to avoid Lady Bethany completely by

staying home during the day and refraining from putting in an appearance at other social functions. His mother was, as expected, distraught by this deliberate absence of his since she'd hoped he'd find a lady to court this Season, but to chance meeting Lady Bethany again was simply too risky.

Especially since there could be no denying the fierce desire he felt for her. Not when the simplest touch of her hand on his arm caused a wave of heat to roll through him. Not when one glance at her lips made him desperate to know how she tasted. Not when his dreams were increasingly plagued by her presence. And not when those dreams left him aching with need when he woke.

A shudder went through him as he read the invitation again. It involved a house party at the Langdon estate near Swindon. Guests were asked to arrive on April thirtieth, two weeks before the wedding was set to take place.

Charles closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. He'd known it would come to this. Robert had mentioned it in passing, but to have it confirmed was something else. It brought his doubts and his fears, his inappropriate yearning for his friend's fiancée, into very sharp focus. How was he supposed to spend two weeks in her company when no more than half an hour was enough to make him wish he'd met her first?

He scrubbed the palm of his hand across his jaw and prayed for strength and resilience. As hard as it would be, he'd have to suppress his feelings and get through the days ahead. Even if it killed him. Setting the invitation aside, he went to ask his brothers if they were up for a game of darts.

He found them both in the library.

"You never win," James said when Charles asked about the game.

"I know," Charles muttered, "but I enjoy the challenge of trying to beat you." And the game would offer a welcome distraction, which was all he really cared about at the moment.

"Very well," William said, "but if I win, I'll expect you to introduce me to Mrs. Baker."

Charles glanced up at the ceiling while considering the beautiful widow who'd recently let it be known she was seeking a protector. "I doubt you'll be able to afford her."

William responded with a quelling look. "Allow me to worry about that, dear brother. As it stands, I'd give my left foot just to



learn what she has to offer.”

“Forget that,” James said. “You ought to be more concerned with what she’s expecting.”

Charles happened to agree. It wasn’t a secret that William was still a virgin, which meant he would lack the experience a woman of Mrs. Baker’s renown would likely demand in a lover. Still...

“Perhaps I can make an agreement with her, just for one night, with no obligation for her to see you again after that.”

William made a face. He seemed to consider. “Fine,” he eventually muttered.

“And if *I* win,” James said slyly, “I want your portion of Cook’s éclairs for the next week.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” Charles said with a twist of his lips. “I’ll agree.”

James’s eyes widened, for he knew how fond Charles was of sweets, but he refrained from commenting, for which Charles was grateful. The last thing he wanted was for him or William to suspect things weren’t as they should be, because then they’d get curious and the questions would start, and if there was one thing that all his siblings had in common, it was the ability to interrogate each other successfully.

The game commenced on the terrace, and as usual, Charles failed to match the skill of his brothers. Still, he did enjoy the game, the camaraderie between them, the jokes they shared at each other’s expense, and the chance it gave him to forget. Until the butler arrived to announce that Robert had come to call.

Charles left his brothers to continue the game while he went to greet his friend.

“I need an urgent favor,” Robert said as soon as Charles entered the parlor where Robert waited. “Bethany has gotten it into her head that we’re meant to visit some Viking museum today, but I can’t for the life of me remember agreeing. So I made other plans, and now she’s in my carriage outside, and I’m not really sure what to do.”

Charles stared at Robert and then, because he could not help himself from saying the first thing that came to mind, he blurted, “You’re an idiot.”

Robert stared back at him. He winced slightly before admitting, “I think you might be right.”

A grin caught Charles’s lips and a jolt of laughter rushed from

his throat. He shook his head. "Your best course of action is to cancel your plans and take your fiancée on the excursion she's expecting you to accompany her on."

"I rather thought I'd ask you to go in my stead."

"What?"

"You've always liked museums more than I, and the two of you seem to get on well enough. I dare say it won't be so bad."

"Are you mad?" Charles asked. Surely Robert had taken a blow to his head since the last time they'd seen each other. "Lady Bethany is *your* fiancée, Robert. *You* are the one who ought to be spending time with her, romancing her, and getting to know her better."

Robert gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "We have the rest of our lives for that. But my chance to invest in the businesses holding my interest and to acquire the land I want is a fleeting opportunity. My financial situation, while not exactly dire, isn't the best."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea." Charles knit his brow. "What happened?"

Robert shrugged. "I made some poor investments and lost a great deal of money. My parents don't know, but it's the reason why I went to New York, and it's the reason why I'm now pursuing these other opportunities. Our livelihoods could very well depend on whether or not my negotiations meet with success, so please, take Lady Bethany on the outing and allow me to see to my other obligations."

Charles pressed his lips together and crossed his arms. "I think that's a lousy idea."

Robert blew out a breath. "I need to finish up with these dealings before we leave London for the house party." He gave Charles a pleading look. "I'll never ask you for anything else ever again."

Charles wasn't sure he believed that, but to accept... He shook his head. "If you really can't manage the outing today, then you ought to reschedule with Lady Bethany for tomorrow."

"She's supposed to meet with her seamstress tomorrow so that won't work, and the day after that I've other appointments, and then we're off to the house party."

"Then perhaps when you return to London you could—"

"Why the reluctance to help me with this, Charles?" Robert stared at him with extreme disappointment. "You're my friend, so I

was sure I could count on your help, no matter what. I have to say that your unwillingness surprises me.” He studied Charles before adding, “It also makes me wonder about your reasoning.”

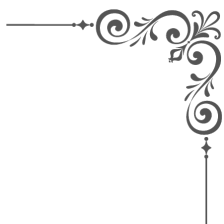
Charles’s heart jolted inside his chest. “Women like to be the center of their husband’s, or in this case, fiancé’s attention. I fear Lady Bethany won’t be pleased if I take your place.”

“I’ve explained the matter to her and she’s fine with it,” Robert insisted. “Now will you grant me this favor or shall I turn to Craven instead?”

Charles inhaled sharply. Robert clearly knew how to force his hand by suggesting his second cousin as an alternative. Charles had never liked the pompous dandy or the habit he had of speaking of women as if they were made for the sole purpose of pleasing men. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am desperate, Charles.”

Charles gritted his teeth and cursed Robert for mismanaging his schedule. “Fine. I shall escort her.” And suffer the torture he’d been trying to save himself from, if only to avoid telling Robert the truth.



## Chapter Three

BETHANY WAS NOT THE least bit pleased with how her day was turning out. Since accepting Robert's proposal, she'd suggested numerous ways for them to spend time together, but he invariably managed to avoid participation. Today was no different. He'd forgotten he had a meeting, or rather, he'd forgotten he'd agreed to accompany her and had instantly suggested asking Mr. Townsbridge if he could escort her instead.

Bethany's pulse had leapt at the mention of the man whose mere presence was capable of tying her stomach in knots. Since the garden party, she'd unwittingly searched for him at every social event she'd attended. But he'd been absent, whether by necessity or by design, she had no idea. Either way, she'd been slightly relieved, for it had allowed her to focus more fully on Robert and the fact that she was engaged to marry him.

Her determination to make the match work had prompted her to write up a list of activities she believed would encourage them to engage with each other more and thus form a closer attachment. When she'd suggested the Viking museum to him once again just a few days ago, she'd been thrilled by his agreement to join her, only to be disappointed when he told her he wouldn't be able to go with her after all.

Disgruntled by his apparent reluctance to spend time with her and make the necessary effort required for their relationship to work, she hadn't bothered to argue when he'd suggested calling on Mr. Townsbridge and asking him if he could escort her instead. In her estimation it served Robert right if his lack of interest in her and their future caused her to spend time with a man who made her skin tingle instead. One thing was for certain, she told herself, if

their marriage failed to work and they ended up living apart, it would not be her fault. She at least would take comfort in knowing she'd tried.

And then Mr. Townsbridge climbed into the carriage, and Bethany's aggravation with Robert increased. How could he possibly encourage a man as handsome as Mr. Townsbridge to spend the entire day with his fiancée? It was beyond careless and only served to increase her assurance that Robert's only purpose in marrying her was to secure her dowry.

"Good morning," Mr. Townsbridge said. He sat down opposite her and glanced around, then frowned as if unsure he was in the right place. "No chaperone?"

Bethany's cheeks heated. She cleared her throat and made an attempt at effecting indifference. "She couldn't make it."

The carriage took off and Mr. Townsbridge's frown deepened. "She couldn't make it?"

Bethany puffed out a breath. "My hope was to spend the day with Robert alone, so I made plans to prevent my maid from accompanying us while ensuring my parents would not be the wiser."

Bafflement lent a faraway look to Mr. Townsbridge's eyes. It appeared he was already thinking up ways in which to escape her company.

"I knew this would be a bad idea," he said. "I told Robert as much but he refused to listen. We cannot possibly proceed with this excursion, my lady. Especially not without a chaperone."

"I agree." She should have asked Robert to see her home when he'd told her he could not join her. But she'd been so incredibly angry with him and now... She glanced at Mr. Townsbridge. The intensity of his gaze made her stomach flip. Her mouth grew dry and her eyes instinctively dropped to his lips.

No.

She was marrying Robert.

*Robert, Robert, Robert.*

"If you please," she murmured, exhausted by all the tumultuous feelings crashing through her, "we can halt the carriage so you can step down. I'll return home and inform my parents that I developed a megrim and needed to cancel the excursion. No one needs be the wiser."

"Excellent." Relief flooded his features, and Bethany realized

that he was just as reluctant to share her company as Robert was.

*Brilliant.*

The poor man had obviously been strong-armed into escorting her and desperately longed to be elsewhere. As proved by the fact that he rapped on the roof one second later, informing the driver they wanted to stop. Bethany glanced away from him, directing her gaze out the window so he wouldn't see the emotion in her eyes. She knew it had to be visible, for she felt it acutely, the despair trembling inside her like struggling flames.

The carriage drew to a halt and a moment of silence ensued. "I hope you can forgive us both," Mr. Townsbridge said. "For ruining your day."

"You mustn't blame yourself, Mr. Townsbridge. You simply tried to be helpful."

She heard his boots scrape across the floor and then the click of the door opening. Swallowing, she decided to add one last parting comment. "You were wrong about him, by the way. He will not support my architectural aspirations. What he seeks is a proper Society wife. Not one who might incite gossip."

She could sense him hovering in the doorway, but she refused to look back, too afraid of what she would see in his expression.

"I'm sorry," he said. The carriage rocked slightly as he stepped down onto the pavement below. "Enjoy the rest of your day, my lady. After all, I trust it can only get better."

His words caused a sharp pain to dart through her chest. She turned to face him just as the carriage door closed, but she met his gaze through the window and held it as she drove away, all too aware that she might have made a tremendous mistake when she'd agreed to marry Robert.



THE REST OF APRIL WAS filled with wedding preparations and packing. The wedding cake had to be designed, the menu for the wedding breakfast finalized. Bethany's gown required additional fittings, and her trousseau also had to be completed. And then everything needed to be carefully placed in boxes so it could be transported to Langdon House.

But in between the busyness of it all, Bethany was very aware of Robert's absence. If she was lucky, he'd stop by for tea twice a week, but he never stayed long. There was always an excuse for

him to hurry on his way, so she'd given up asking him if he wanted to go for a walk with her or engage in a game of cards. He never had the time, or if he did, he had no desire to spend it with her.

As she acknowledged this fact, she realized that it was time for her to stop hoping she'd ever experience the same kind of spark with Robert that she'd felt toward Mr. Townsbridge. She winced at that thought as she placed an additional shawl inside her valise. To think she'd felt more of a connection with a stranger who'd saved her bonnet than she did with the man she'd be spending the rest of her life with was really quite sad.

Depressed and unsure of what to do except call off the wedding, she continued packing with mechanical movements, each second that passed bringing her closer to what felt more like an execution than a happy occasion. But perhaps Robert would be different at Langdon? Perhaps there he would have more time for her? She clung to that hope as she and her parents departed London and until she arrived at Langdon House, only to discover that Robert would not be joining them for another week.

"This is highly irregular," Bethany's father said once the butler had finished delivering the news.

"As I mentioned, his lordship has offered his sincerest apologies. He has also asked that the staff here ensures your comfort as well as that of the other guests," the butler said with the typical sort of loftiness associated with his vocation. "You need not worry about a thing. Mrs. Watts, the housekeeper, and I shall make sure no one wants for anything. Indeed, I dare say you won't even notice Lord Langdon's absence."

Bethany slumped, her ability to stand straight abandoning her as defeat took over. She glanced at her mother, who did not look the least bit pleased. "I cannot believe he would do this to you," she said, confirming her annoyance as the butler led the way upstairs to their bedchambers. She made no attempt at discretion, which meant the butler must have heard her, though he showed no sign of doing so.

Bethany cringed. "The earl is a busy man."

"Too busy to be a fiancé," her mother muttered, "never mind a husband or a father."

"That is unfair," Bethany said as they reached the top of the stairs and proceeded along a corridor. "Robert is doing what is necessary in order to secure our future."

“Considering your dowry of ten thousand pounds, I fail to see the urgency,” Pratchard said.

So did Bethany, but she still felt compelled to defend her future husband. Her loyalty should be toward him now, even if he made her heart sink a little bit more with every disappointment he caused.

“I’m sorry we encouraged you to form an attachment to Lord Langdon,” Bethany’s mother told her the following day during breakfast. “Regrettably, I must confess to being blinded by his rank and his assets, but it occurs to me now that his indifference toward you is such that the rest of it no longer seems to matter. To be honest, I’d rather see you wed to a chimney sweep who dotes on you than to an earl who’d rather be anywhere else than by your side.”

“Hear, hear,” Pratchard said in support of his wife’s opinion.

Bethany sipped her tea and considered the piece of toast on her plate. “While I appreciate that, I see little point in having regrets at this juncture. The wedding is set to take place and must go on for the sake of avoiding a scandal. To break off an engagement at the very last minute would speak ill of my character and yours by association, never mind the repercussions it would have on Robert.”

“We just don’t want you to be unhappy,” her mother said.

Bethany managed a smile. “I shan’t be. I promise.” After all, it was not as if she were missing out on marrying the man of her dreams. Mr. Townsbridge would never propose. Not after she jilted his friend. His sense of honor simply wouldn’t allow it, as evidenced by his reluctance to share her company.

Her parents did not look convinced. Their concern for her wellbeing was etched on both of their faces, which made everything so much harder. But wallowing in self-pity would get her nowhere, nor would it help her mood. So rather than skulk about indoors while dreading the days ahead, Bethany resolved to go for a walk in the garden after finishing her breakfast. It was a beautiful day with golden sunlight brightening the flowers and birdsong filling the air.

Deciding to become better acquainted with what would soon be her new home, she left the terrace to stroll along a graveled path. Bees buzzed as they gathered nectar while butterflies flittered between the blooming peonies. A smile tugged at Bethany’s lips. Langdon House was lovely. She could be comfortable here, and once she and Robert had children, they would fill her life with the



sort of joy their father could not provide.

When Bethany reached a wide expanse of grass, her smile widened. This would be perfect for playing shuttlecock or pall mall. It was also well suited for a picnic if they ever decided to dine *al fresco*. Not that Robert was likely to participate in any of these things, Bethany reminded herself, but she'd invite family and friends to visit, an entire army of people to distract her from what her marriage would be missing.

Seeing a lake in the distance, she started walking toward it. This was where she would choose to spend most of her days, alone with her sketchpad, dreaming up buildings that would never be built.

The sound of horses caught her attention, and she glanced toward the road to see two carriages approaching the house. The first one drew to a sudden stop causing the second to halt as well. A pause followed, and then the door opened. Bethany shielded her eyes against the sun as Mr. Townsbridge alit. Even at a distance, he had the power to make her stomach contract. More so when he started toward her, his long stride eating up the distance between them. The carriages continued toward the house, but not before a young woman jumped out of the second one. She raced to catch up to Mr. Townsbridge and together they made their way across the field to where Bethany was standing.

"Lady Bethany," Mr. Townsbridge said by way of greeting once they were within earshot of each other. "I spotted you from the carriage and thought I'd come to greet you directly. This is my youngest sister, Miss Athena."

"A pleasure to meet you," Bethany said while admiring the shared characteristics between the siblings. Both had the same dark hair, but while Mr. Townsbridge's eyes were rich like chocolate, Athena's were slightly paler and with a hint of green at the center. She also had more delicate features than her brother. Where his chin was angular, hers was pointed.

"Likewise," Athena told her brightly. "Charles has told me so much about you."

Bethany grinned in response to the girl's exuberance. "Really?" She couldn't quite imagine what he might have said. Glancing at him, she caught a hint of amusement in his eyes before he directed his gaze at his sister.

"When I told him I long to go digging for treasure in Egypt, he said that as long as a woman can dream of being an architect, she

can also set her mind to being an explorer.”

Feeling her chest grow tight and her eyes start to burn, Bethany deliberately recommenced walking toward the lake. “Dreams are wonderful things to have,” she murmured while the tightness pressed against her heart. “I hope yours comes true, Miss Athena.”

“He also told me you have a contagious zest for life that’s similar to my own and that I was bound to like you very much.”

Startled by this analysis of her character, Bethany darted a look at Mr. Townsbridge. His gaze was fixed upon her with such intensity that her cheeks grew instantly hot and her legs a little unsteady. Effecting a laugh to hide the effect he was having on her, she said, “Your brother and I hardly know each other well enough for him to form such an opinion.”

“No?” The question came from him, delivered in a low timbre that awoke every nerve in her body. “I have seen you race through a park in pursuit of a bonnet, dance with laughter in your eyes, and take on the task of romancing your fiancé. Speaking of which...I’m a little surprised to find you walking out here without him.”

His words carried with them a hint of concern. Bethany glanced at Athena. “Do you suppose there are fish in that lake?” she asked.

Athena scrunched her lips while considering. And then she grinned. “I don’t know, but I’m about to find out.”

She ran the remaining distance to the lake until she reached the water’s edge, allowing Bethany to answer Mr. Townsbridge’s question in private. “Robert has gone to see about a cotton mill that he hopes to invest in. He won’t arrive until next week.”

Mr. Townsbridge’s eyes darkened, and his features appeared to tighten. “He is neglecting you,” he murmured. His chest rose and fell with measured movements. For a second, he glanced away as if studying something in the distance, but then his gaze returned to hers, more fierce than before. “Please accept my apologies on his behalf. Robert is doing what he thinks best, but when it comes to you...” He clenched his jaw, and when Bethany lowered her gaze to his hands, she saw that they were balled into fists. “You must forgive him, my lady. His preoccupation with work has apparently overwhelmed him.”

“Of course.” She could think of nothing else to say, so she simply stood there watching Athena’s surveillance of the water, acutely aware of the way her skin tingled in response to Mr. Townsbridge’s presence.



UNDERSTANDING ROBERT was a challenge for Charles. His friend had secured an attachment with the loveliest woman in the world, and yet he preferred to bury himself in work and avoid her completely. Even if he needed to make back the money he'd lost, the situation could not be so desperate that he wasn't able to give his attention to Bethany. At least until after they were married. It made no sense. Nor did the knowledge that Robert would not be supporting his wife in the pursuit of her dreams. The sadness with which she'd conveyed this news the last time he'd seen her had kept his mind busy ever since. He'd repeatedly wondered if he ought to interfere – if sitting Robert down and asking him what the devil was wrong with him might be helpful.

But then he'd decided it wasn't his business. He had no cause to involve himself in his friend's affairs. Especially when doing so meant taking Lady Bethany's side against Robert. And yet, the house party had begun, but the master of the house – the bloody groom – remained absent. It was not only rude to the guests but an unforgivable slight toward Lady Bethany and her family. It also didn't fit with the man Charles knew Robert to be, which had always been reliable and loyal to a fault.

Expelling a breath, Charles decided that in spite of his every intention to keep his distance from Lady Bethany, he would now have to do what he could to fill the void Robert had left. It wouldn't be easy. Not when each glance she gave him caused hot little embers to scorch his skin. Which was why he'd refused to escort her to the Viking museum when he'd learned they'd be going without a chaperone.

It had not only been her reputation he'd feared for, but his own thinly held control where she was concerned. Before he'd even quit the carriage, he'd imagined pulling her onto his lap and kissing her senseless, of sliding his hands across her body, exploring her curves, and eliciting small sighs of pleasure.

Even now, after a month apart, arousal tugged at his body as he recalled the chance he'd had with her in the carriage. A chance he'd deliberately turned his back on, overriding his primal instinct because of his longstanding friendship with Robert. But the more aware he became of Robert's flaws where Lady Bethany was concerned, the more he feared for his own resolve.

Expelling a tortured breath, he scrubbed his hand across his jaw. "Shall we return to the house? My parents will be there with the rest of my siblings. I'd like to introduce you to them."

"Yes," Lady Bethany murmured. She called for Athena to join them and waited until she'd reached them before heading back to the house. "Did you ever come here as a child?" she asked him as they walked.

Charles tilted his head and thought back. "I recall spending a couple of summers here around the ages of eleven and thirteen. My parents and siblings came as well, and Robert's mother would arrange a treasure hunt with the most peculiar riddles." He grinned at the reminder. "We also went boating on the lake back there and rode out to the ruins of Castle Bracknell for picnics."

"There's a castle ruin?" Lady Bethany and Athena both asked in unison.

Excitement lit up Lady Bethany's face, making her even more beautiful than usual. She looked happy for a change, and as it occurred to him that he was the cause, a wave of warmth swept through him. It also prompted him to say, "I see no reason why we cannot go see it one day."

"Can we do so tomorrow?" Athena asked.

"That depends entirely on her ladyship and the plans she has in store for us."

"Oh." Lady Bethany smiled at him with delight, her radiance so bright he could scarcely breathe. "I think an outing to the castle ruins would be a marvelous way to spend the day."

Pleased with the knowledge that he'd lifted her spirits, he smiled to himself as they kept on walking.

*Careful*, a faint voice warned, reminding him that regardless of how much she'd started mattering to him, she wasn't and never would be his.



CARRIAGES KEPT ON ARRIVING throughout the day, bringing additional guests to Langdon. Hiding her discomfort over Robert's absence beneath a forced smile, Bethany greeted each person with the help of her parents, acutely aware of the fact that she was meeting some of these people for the very first time. Robert really should have been there to make introductions, a sentiment that was voiced not only by her mother for what had to be the millionth

time, but by Mr. Townsbridge's family as well. And every time a newly arrived guest inquired about Robert's whereabouts and she explained the circumstances, she was met with wide-eyed dismay.

"I shall have to have a word with him when he gets here," Robert's mother, the Marchioness of Darlington, said when she and her husband arrived. "This is completely unacceptable and so very unlike him. You poor dear. Of all the things to put you through."

Bethany appreciated the sympathy even though she'd already accepted the situation for what it was. She no longer felt any anger or disappointment, only numbness and a strange detachment from reality.

"Not to worry," Lady Darlington said as she took Bethany's hands between her own as if to impart solidarity. "We are ready to help in any way we can."

"Thank you."

The marchioness smiled at her warmly, then slid her gaze toward Bethany's mother. "Shall we see to it that an informal tea is served on the terrace so proper introductions can be made?"

Bethany's mother nodded, excused herself to Bethany and walked away with the marchioness.

"A lady's ability to manage a household is something to be admired," the marquess mumbled.

"They're rather like generals, overseeing an army of servants," Bethany's father said.

The marquess nodded his agreement, and the two men fell into conversation while gradually moving away from the door.

A new carriage arrived and Bethany glanced in her father's direction only to find that his back was now turned toward her as he listened to what the marquess was saying.

With a sigh, she straightened her spine, squared her shoulders and raised her chin in defiance.

"Care for some company?" Mr. Townsbridge's smooth voice inquired. The hair at the nape of her neck responded. Her skin tingled with heightened awareness on account of his closeness. A delicious kind of warmth caressed her skin, and her stomach began to flutter.

"Yes please," she said, even though she knew she shouldn't be encouraging him to spend time with her. He was merely being polite, and she ought to have had the sense to decline. "I don't know who this is," she told him in reference to the young man

presently alighting from the carriage. "If you can help, I'd appreciate it."

Mr. Townsbridge stepped forward and as he did so, his shoulder brushed against hers. The superfine wool of his jacket scraped over her skin, and a frisson raced down the length of her arm. She swallowed against the sudden dryness in her throat and clasped her hands together, willing the feeling to pass.

"That is Mr. Hewitt," Mr. Townsbridge murmured close to her ear. His breath caressed the edge of her jaw, coaxing every cell in her body to respond. "He is another close friend of Robert's."

Unable to speak for fear of sounding too breathy, Bethany nodded and took a step forward, away from Mr. Townsbridge's virile masculinity. It would, she hoped, appear to him as though she was simply going to greet Mr. Hewitt, when in fact she was trying to escape the longing he stirred in her heart and her soul.

The newly arrived guest doffed his hat in greeting. "Lady Bethany, I presume?"

She inclined her head. "Welcome to Langdon House, Mr. Hewitt."

"Thank you, my lady. I've been looking forward to meeting the woman who has captured Langdon's heart." Mr. Hewitt's gaze shifted to Mr. Townsbridge. "Charles. Good to see you again." The men shook hands, and when Hewitt asked about Robert, Mr. Townsbridge casually explained the situation to him. Mr. Hewitt's eyebrows rose. "I see." A grin appeared on his angular face. "If it wasn't for the fact that the invitation listed him as the groom, I'd have thought the two of you were the ones getting married."

"Really?" Bethany squeaked.

Mr. Hewitt's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Well, you are standing here on the front step greeting the guests together." His expression grew pensive, but rather than say anything further, he shook his head as if trying to dislodge his thoughts. "Clearly you are well acquainted already, which is just as it should be. I've always been of the opinion that making sure one's wife gets along well with one's friends is vitally important to one's continued happiness."

"You speak as though you have plans of matrimony yourself," Mr. Townsbridge murmured.

Mr. Hewitt laughed. "Not yet, my friend, but who knows? Perhaps I shall meet an enticing lady here. If I recall, your sisters

are—”

“Hewitt...” Mr. Townsbridge’s voice held a note of warning.

Mr. Hewitt laughed. “You’re just as easily provoked as always. Ah, I have missed you.”

“And I have missed you,” Mr. Townsbridge said. His frown seconds earlier had given way to a smile. “Why don’t you go and get settled into your room. The butler will show you the way. And then you can come back down for tea on the terrace.”

Mr. Hewitt inclined his head toward Bethany and went to follow the butler who’d been waiting for him nearby.

Bethany turned to watch Mr. Hewitt walk away. “I gather he’s a bit of a rake?”

Mr. Townsbridge crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels. “He likes to pretend he is, but in truth he’s an absolute gentleman.”

“So then he was joking when he mentioned a potential interest in one of your sisters?”

“Yes.” He dropped his gaze in her direction. “What you witnessed just now was our way of sparring with each other. It wasn’t much different to the other comment he made about you and I being the couple that everyone’s come here to celebrate. I hope you did not take offense to that for I know it was meant in good sport.”

“You may rest assured that I was not the least bit offended. On the contrary, I found it amusing.” Her voice was thankfully level and calm, belying the riotous state of her nerves.

“Amusing?”

“Certainly. I mean, I am obviously marrying Robert, and yet he’s not here but you are and well...here we are, greeting guests together, just as Mr. Hewitt said. It could give the wrong impression.”

His eyes sharpened even as they narrowed. A darkness seemed to settle in the depth of his gaze, causing Bethany to suck in a breath. “And you find that amusing?”

“Well, I...” She shook her head, suddenly unnerved by the way he was leaning toward her, dominating the space around her. Her body trembled in response, unsettled and yet strangely enraptured. His head tilted in question, and for some unknown reason, she dropped her gaze to his lips and unwittingly wondered how they might feel and taste beneath her own.

*You’ll never know.*

Her heart ricocheted wildly in protest as that thought took hold, forcing her to be completely honest. “If I can’t, what chance do I possibly have of getting through this?”

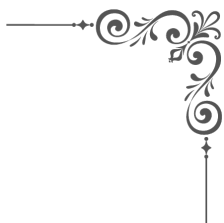
His nostrils flared on a sharp inhalation, and she realized too late how much she’d revealed. “I didn’t mean...” She stopped herself in the middle of the lie and closed her eyes instead, blocking him out as she struggled to rise above the humiliation of what he now knew.

“Bethany.” His voice was whisper soft, the sound of her name akin to a prayer.

She stood perfectly still, too scared to move for fear of doing something reckless, like claiming the kiss she now imagined sharing with him. The mere thought of it stirred her imagination and quickened her breaths. “You should go.” It was the only way for her to save herself from submitting to every desire he’d instilled in her since the moment they’d met.

There was a brief pause during which she could feel the air shifting between them. The heat of his body faded as he stepped back, and then she heard the click of his retreating footsteps upon the marble floor. When she opened her eyes again he was gone, and even though the house was now filled with people, she’d never felt more alone.





## Chapter Four

CHARLES'S MIND WAS in turmoil. He wanted his friend's fiancée, dammit. He wanted Bethany with an overwhelming fierceness he'd never experienced before in his life, and from what he'd gathered from her comment a short while ago, she wanted him too. Which was just about the worst observation he'd ever made. Because resisting her when he'd believed her heart was set on Robert was one thing, but now, when he knew their attraction was mutual, being near her would be like playing with fire.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and considered his options. None was viable since each involved hurting Robert, perhaps even bringing shame down on all of their heads. So then the only thing to do was fight it. With this in mind, he gritted his teeth and went to enjoy the tea on the terrace while carefully keeping his distance from Lady Bethany. But ignoring her completely was impossible. Especially when he spied her laughing over something together with his brothers and sisters. A smile tugged at his lips as he realized how comfortable she seemed to be with them, and it struck him then that with Robert she never truly relaxed. It was as if he kept her on edge, stopping her from revealing her true self.

He'd seen that true self the first day he'd met her in the park, and he saw it now – a freedom of spirit that warmed his heart and caused him to yearn.

"She's very special," his mother said as she came to stand beside him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see she was watching him closely and with more interest than he liked. "Robert has chosen well for himself, I'll give him that." He took a sip of his tea and turned to look at his mother. "For a while there, I wasn't sure he'd

manage it, considering some of the ladies he's shown an interest in in the past."

His mother snorted. "You may feign aloofness as much as you like, Charles, but I am not blind. So whatever it is that's between you two, I suggest you take care of it soon. Before the wedding."

He knew what she meant – that he had to either cut all ties or make a drastic decision, but the way she said it, the double entendre he found in her words, thickened his blood as it rushed through his veins. Desire gripped him and arousal took hold. He could think of a thousand different ways to take care of it, none of which were the least bit proper.

Aware he was standing too close to the edge of a dangerous abyss, he clenched his jaw and set down his teacup. "There is nothing," he told his mother with the sort of coolness that deserved a prize. "And there never will be."



THE NEXT DAY WAS PERFECT for going to see the castle ruins. Bethany set off on foot with her parents and some of the other guests, which included all of the Townsbridges, the Darlingtons, and Mr. Hewitt. A carriage filled with picnic supplies had gone on ahead with a couple of footmen to set things up. Swatting away a fly, Bethany plucked a long blade of grass from the field they were crossing and used it to make a whistling sound.

Athena rushed to her side. "I've always wanted to be able to do that. Can you please show me how?"

Grinning in response to the girl's exuberance, Bethany selected another blade of grass and handed it to her. "You have to hold it like this," she instructed as they continued walking. "And then you hold it up to your mouth, purse your lips and blow." She demonstrated how it was done and then waited for Athena to give it a try.

No sound emerged, except that of her puffing out air. She scrunched her nose. "Am I holding this right?"

Bethany drew to a halt and checked the blade's position between the girl's hands. She made a slight adjustment and told her to try again. Still no whistling could be heard. "Move your mouth a little and give it another go," Bethany encouraged.

Athena did as she suggested, and suddenly, a faint whistling sound emerged. Athena's eyes widened and she blew harder, adding

strength to the sound. "I did it." She laughed and spontaneously flung her arms around Bethany in a hug. "Thank you so much for teaching me this."

Bethany's heart swelled as she smiled down at the girl. "Keep practicing now without my assistance. Before you know it you'll be ready to start your own grass-blade quartet."

Athena grinned and they recommenced walking. "My brothers can all hoot with their hands and whistle with their fingers. Unlike Sarah who's much too proper to engage in such activities, I've always envied them their abilities."

"I can teach you how to do those things as well as skip stones," Bethany told her, liking the idea of putting the young girl on equal footing with her older brothers.

"Charles is really good at that. He once made a stone bounce six times across the surface of the water."

Smiling, Bethany leaned a bit closer to Athena and told her conspiratorially, "My record is eight."

Athena gasped. "Truly?" When Bethany nodded, a peal of laughter escaped the girl and then she turned her head slightly and shouted in Mr. Townsbridge's direction, "Bethany says her stone skipping skills are superior to yours."

"Is that so?" Mr. Townsbridge asked while a hot flush rose to Bethany's cheeks.

She coughed. "That's not what I said."

"It was certainly implied," Athena insisted. "You cannot deny it."

Indeed she could not, but she hadn't expected the girl to make the fact quite so public.

"Perhaps I should challenge you to a contest, my lady?"

Bethany flinched, startled by Mr. Townsbridge's closeness, for she had not heard him approach. Her pulse quickened and the warmth in her cheeks crept lower, settling deep in her belly. "Only if you're willing to lose," she quipped in the hope of keeping the conversation light and her mind away from the way she ached for his touch.

"I fear I've already done so," he whispered, causing riotous thoughts and emotions to clash with each other in a futile effort to be understood. And then, as if his statement and his nearness weren't bad enough, his fingers brushed hers, so fleetingly it barely happened at all, but enough to rob Bethany of air.

“How do you mean?” Athena asked in the same boisterous way she’d asked Bethany to show her how to whistle with a blade of grass.

Mr. Townsbridge gave a shrug. “Nothing, Imp.” He took a step sideways as if to avoid a hole in the road, distancing himself from Bethany. “Will you be our referee?”

Athena clapped her hands together with delight. “Oh yes. I would love to.”

With a warm smile directed at his sister, Mr. Townsbridge turned away and went to join his brothers, who were walking a bit further behind. Bethany’s fingers still remembered his touch, the tips of them tingling as if to inform her that they wanted more. This was madness. She was losing her mind and would likely end up in Bedlam before her wedding day if this continued.

Her only recourse was to focus on the pleasure of the excursion. The ruin was wonderfully romantic with colorful wildflowers dotting the ground and vines climbing over the walls. “This would make a perfect sanctuary – the perfect place to escape to,” she told Mr. Townsbridge after lunch when he asked her what she thought of the place.

Balancing along a low wall, she wobbled when a stone gave way beneath her weight, and she was instantly steadied by the touch of his hand. A jolt tore through her, and she gasped in response. “Careful,” he warned as he slowly released her. “I would not want you to fall.”

Heart racing, she slowly nodded while desperately trying to silence the voice that told her she already had. Holding her gaze, Mr. Townsbridge backed away before quickly turning and going to join his parents, who were still enjoying their meal.

With a sigh, Bethany prayed for Robert’s speedy arrival. At least if he was here to remind her of all the reasons she could not let herself want another man, never mind his friend, she might stand a chance.

But as the days wore on and she found herself spending more time with Mr. Townsbridge, regret manifested itself inside her, gripping her until she feared she would suffocate from it. She was trapped. Trapped in an unhappy engagement with a man whose interest in her was on par with her own interest in dust mites. At least if he’d cared somehow, proved to her that she mattered to him more than merely accomplishing a goal, she would have had cause

to hope for an acceptable future at his side.

Instead, she only became more aware of her mounting feelings for Mr. Townsbridge. Flopping onto her bed one late afternoon with every intention of taking a nap, she considered the man she'd come to like so much better than his friend. He made her want things she'd never wanted before – his hands on every inch of her body, his lips against hers. But it was more than that, more than the physical attraction inevitably drawing them together. It was the fact that he made her laugh, challenged her at every game they'd played these past few days, showed genuine concern over her future happiness – particularly with regard to her dreams.

"Give him time," he'd told her yesterday when he'd happened upon her with her sketchpad in the garden. She'd been drawing Langdon House and jotting down notes about the various design elements. "He'll come around eventually, you'll see. A year from now I wager he'll be championing your ideas for the next architectural project."

She'd forced a smile in response even though she'd doubted every word. Robert had been adamant. He would not support her as anything other than a perfect model wife. But Mr. Townsbridge would, and this alone was enough to make her wish she had met him first. Add to that the respect and fondness with which he treated his family, the warmth in his eyes when he looked her way, and the fact that he made her feel as though she could be the best version of herself with him by her side. She flung her hand over her eyes with a groan. Why, oh why, oh why, did he have to be Robert's friend?



CHARLES WAS RESTLESS. There was no other way to describe it. Not when he found himself pacing his bedchamber floor at odd hours of the night because sleep refused to claim him. *Christ!* He could not get Bethany out of his head, and the more she lingered, her lovely face etched on his brain, the more he imagined, and the more he imagined, the more he wanted... Her. Right there. On his bed. Naked.

Arousal ignited, heating his blood as it burned through his veins. He muttered a curse and fought the images away, of Bethany sprawled out beneath him, of the sensual moans she would utter as he teased her into a frenzy. God, she'd be spirited with her

lovemaking, he just knew it. The sort of woman who raced after bonnets, laughed with abandon, balanced her way across stonework as she'd done at the ruin, and leapt with joy when she beat him at skipping stones, would be nothing short of glorious in bed.

He glanced at the piece of furniture on which he now longed to show her pleasure. His arousal grew and with it his discomfort. She was a lady and he was a scoundrel for having such lecherous thoughts. Deliberately, he shifted his mind toward her and Robert, to the fact that he, not Charles, would have the pleasure of climbing into Bethany's bed and making her his.

His desire withered and faded, scattering about him like wilted flowers. He was torturing himself by thinking this way, and to what end? What good could it possibly do?

Unsure how to answer that question, he dressed and went to the stables where he borrowed a horse. He couldn't run away. Honor would not permit it, but perhaps a brisk ride would help.

When he returned to the stables later, clouds were starting to gather, turning the sky a depressing shade of gray. He handed the horse over to one of the grooms and then walked back to the house, arriving in the front drive at the same time as a carriage. The vehicle stopped, the door opened and Robert stepped down.

"Charles!" Robert strode forward to shake Charles's hand, adding a pat on his back for good measure. "I'm finally here, thank God! You will not believe the week I've had. I trust all is well and the guests are enjoying themselves?"

Charles gave a slow nod. "Your absence was barely noticeable," he told his friend dryly.

"Good." Robert smiled. Charles's sarcasm was clearly lost on him. He grabbed a satchel from inside the carriage and started toward the house as if his delayed arrival required no further address. Charles fell into step beside him, curious to discover how things would unfold when they entered. "At least I managed to finish my negotiations. Mr. Brown, the cotton mill's owner, is quite the haggler. Getting him to agree on anything proved a challenge, but I am now pleased to inform you that I own forty percent of the business." He opened the front door and stepped into the foyer.

"And the land you were after?"

"By God, I acquired that too." Robert set his satchel down and began removing his gloves which he handed to the butler. "I've got to say, all that hard work has paid off."

"Would you care to know how Lady Bethany is faring?" Charles asked, his annoyance with Robert rising.

Robert gave him an odd look – the sort that seemed to ask what she had to do with any of this.

"You haven't inquired about her," Charles explained. "This woman is going to be your wife, yet you do not seem to spare her a single thought."

"I've had more pressing things on my mind." Robert must have registered how appalled Charles was by that comment, for he blew out a breath and appeared to sag beneath the weight of his clothes. "Bethany is a well-bred debutante who seeks to do what she has been raised to do, which is make a good match. I've felt no cause for concern regarding her, but if you know something I don't, please do enlighten me."

Charles stared at him and then said the only thing that came to mind, "You're an ass."

Robert's eyes widened with surprise. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I think you're about to find out," Charles said as he spotted Lady Darlington. The marchioness was bearing down on them like a dragon swooping in for the kill.

Robert turned, spotted his mother, and took a step back. "Mama! You look well."

She glared at him. "Do not try to pacify me with platitudes, Robert." He stared at her as if he could not comprehend her reaction. "How could you leave your fiancée to manage this party on her own without warning? This is your home, Robert. She had to greet people she's never met, friends of yours, and explain your absence. While she managed to get through it with grace, it would be absurd to think that the experience wasn't humiliating for her."

Rallying in the face of his mother's set down, Robert straightened himself, adding at least an inch to his height. "These business opportunities I've been chasing were not going to wait while I relaxed with family and friends in the country. Other men were interested both in the land and in the cotton mill shares. Had I remained here, I'd have lost the chance to acquire both."

"Even if that's true," Lady Darlington hissed, "you could have handled the situation with better flare. As it stands, the Pratchards are ready to support their daughter in breaking things off, no matter the scandal."

Charles hadn't realized this, and in spite of himself, he felt his heart fill with hope.

But then Robert said, "I will apologize to Bethany. Now that I am here and my work has been completed, I'll be able to give her the attention she deserves."

"See that you do," the marchioness said. She gave her son a pointed look, glanced briefly at Charles, and then walked away.

Robert muttered a curse. "I need a drink." Grabbing his satchel, he strode off in the direction of his study.

Charles followed. He entered the study, closed the door behind him and turned to Robert. "What I cannot understand," he said, his voice low and measured, "is your lack of effort where Bethany is concerned." Robert, who was in the process of pouring a brandy, knit his brow and appeared to form a response. Before he could speak, however, Charles added, "No matter how occupied you have been with these projects of yours, you cannot tell me you did not have time for the occasional walk in the park or a night out at the opera. No one is that busy, not even the bloody prime minister."

Robert narrowed his gaze on Charles and took a sip of his drink. "If I'd wanted that much bother, I would have waited for Bethany to make her debut and then competed against all the other gentlemen out there. But that seemed inefficient when the truth of the matter is that I'm marrying her for convenience, not love. What I require is a respectable Society wife, one who's capable of providing me with heirs, hosting dinners when needed, and staying out of trouble. In return, I shall make sure she is well provided for and never wants for anything."

"Except for her husband's attention," Charles muttered. He blew out a breath and dropped into the nearest chair. "I never realized you were so uncaring...so cold."

A nerve ticked at the edge of Robert's jaw. "You are in serious danger of overstepping the bounds of our friendship, Charles."

"If I can't be honest with you, then what is the point? This is my opinion based on observations I've made. Bethany is eager to get to know you better. She craves your company, longs to form a closer attachment with you and—"

"Let me make something perfectly clear. She is to be my wife, not my friend or my confidante."

"Did you explain this to her?"

"I thought it was obvious given the haste with which I proposed



and the fact that we're not in love." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Lord knows I don't need to experience the emotional chaos of that particular sentiment ever again."

"It could be different with Bethany," Charles told him softly. "If you'd give her a chance."

Robert's jaw tightened. His eyes seemed to darken. "No. I'll manage this marriage as I've managed everything else in my life since Charlotte Walker ran off with my cousin. With logical reasoning and emotional detachment."

"Bethany isn't like Charlotte," Charles said.

"Perhaps not, but if I've learned anything at all, it's that women are skilled at putting on masks. Which is why I intend to keep my guard up at all times."

"And you will be happy with that?"

Robert shrugged and tossed back his drink. "I've been perfectly happy with my life until now. There's no reason why that should change just because I've acquired a wife. I'll still go out and meet with friends, enjoy the occasional company of my mistress, and—"

"You're keeping Lillian?" Charles made no effort to hide his shock or his disapproval.

"Of course." Robert looked at him as if there were something wrong with him for asking. "She satisfies my needs in a way that Bethany never will. And rightfully so. A gently bred lady cannot be expected to perform the same acts as a mistress."

Charles gaped at Robert, for although he technically agreed, he would have dropped his mistress in a heartbeat and looked forward to engaging Bethany in all manner of pleasure if he'd been the one about to wed her. The fact that Robert didn't suggest that he not only had no interest in spending time with her, but that he felt no desire for her at all. Which was utterly astounding, considering the effect she had on Charles.

"I suppose so," he muttered, afraid any other comment would reveal how he truly felt.

The door opened without any warning, giving way to Lady Pratchard. Both men rose to their feet. "Forgive the intrusion but..." She took a deep breath and looked straight at Robert. "Your mother mentioned your arrival, so it only made sense to seek you out when..."

Her words trailed off again, and it occurred to Charles that she looked rather pale. Concern pricked at the nape of his neck.

Something was wrong.

“When what?” Robert prompted.

“I went to inform Bethany of your arrival, but she was not in her bedchamber as I expected. I’ve since searched the downstairs rooms and have asked some of the guests if they’ve seen her.” When Robert raised a questioning eyebrow, Lady Pratchard confirmed Charles’s suspicions by saying, “They have not.”

“This is a large house and I arrived not so long ago. It would have been impossible to look everywhere for her in such short time, so I would not fret, my lady, but if it will ease your mind, Townsbridge and I will help you look.”

Lady Pratchard breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, my lord. It is just so unlike her to disappear like this.” She led the way out into the hallway. “During our stay here, she’s been present downstairs every day, engaging the guests in conversation and games.”

“Is it possible she went for a walk?” Charles asked as he glanced at a window and saw rain now pelting against the glass. The clouds had ruptured while he’d been talking to Robert, and the sky was now dark save for the occasional flash of light.

“In this weather?” Lady Pratchard asked.

“Bethany is a sensible woman,” Robert said. “She would not have left the house to go walking about in a thunderstorm.”

Charles agreed. It seemed unlikely.

With this in mind, he strode through hallways and rooms together with Robert. When they failed to find her within ten minutes, they enlisted the help of servants, but no one seemed to know where she’d gone, which could only mean...

Charles stepped out onto the terrace, sheltered there by a slight overhang as he stared out across the fields. *This would make a perfect sanctuary – the perfect place to escape to.* Instinct stole into his chest, clutching at his heart. Without even thinking, he strode out into the rain and hurried across to the stables. “Ready a horse,” he commanded the groom.

Five minutes later, he was racing toward the castle ruins, determined to discover if he was correct. He dared not imagine what might have compelled her to risk her health like this. One thing was certain and that was that he’d have a few choice words to deliver to her when he found her. Christ, she’d catch her death out here – a thought that caused him to urge his horse into a faster gallop, heedless of his already soaked clothes, the chill sinking into

his bones, and the water pouring over his face. Nothing would stop him from reaching her. Nothing would stop him from keeping her safe.

He rounded a bend and the ruin was there, cast against the darkened sky like a jagged claw reaching toward the heavens. Mud sprayed in every direction as he pulled his horse to a halt. He leapt to the ground and secured the reins to a tree before rushing into the roofless building. "Bethany?" His voice was muffled by wind and rain. "Bethany?"

A whimper caught his attention, and he turned, making his way to a staircase that no longer led anywhere. The sound intensified and then came the unmistakable sound of his name, trembling through the air. "Charles?"

A lump formed in his throat, and he hastened forward, rounding the stairs and entering an area that had most likely been a dining room once. And there, tucked against a corner, was a curled up figure, so small he'd have missed her if he hadn't been searching.

Without hesitation, Charles crouched down and pulled Bethany into his arms. Her body shook as she pressed herself to him, seeking warmth though none was to be found.

"Dear God, what were you thinking?" he asked, his voice strained with all the emotions she instilled in him.

"I couldn't face him," she rasped with the sort of weakness that made Charles hug her even tighter. "Not when..." Her voice broke with a sob. "I just couldn't."

"Shh. It's all right. You don't have to explain, but I do need to get you home before you catch your death out here." Easing his hands beneath her, he scooped her up into his arms and stood. A flash of lightning illuminated her face, so wrought by misery he felt his heart burst with the need to protect her.

The desire to kiss her was overwhelming. He desperately wanted to show her he cared and that in spite of how Robert chose to treat her, she mattered. To him.

Her eyes sharpened with awareness, and her hand curled more firmly around his neck. A tremor raked over his skin where she touched him, banishing the cold and replacing it with heat. Charles bowed his head, his heart pounding hard while the rain continued to fall.

*She's not yours.*

*She's not yours.*

*She's not yours.*

Instead she was soaked and in danger of getting seriously ill. "Damn." He broke eye contact and strode past the stairs, carrying her out of the building and toward his horse.

Neither of them said a word as they returned to Langdon House. In a way there was too much to say, none of it very helpful given the situation. But one thing was clear in Charles's mind; his friendship with Robert would have to end after the wedding. They could never see each other again. Not when he was in love with Bethany and wanted her for himself. The risk was simply too great.



"PREPARE A HOT BATH and tell someone to bring a tea tray up to Lady Bethany's bedchamber! Where is Lady Pratchard?"

Clinging to Charles, Bethany pressed her cheek into his hard chest while he ordered people about. He was just as wet as she, but his solidity and the tight hold he had on her made her feel safe.

He'd almost kissed her earlier. She had no doubt in her mind. And as much as she'd wanted him to go through with it, to show her what it would be like with him just once, a part of her had feared it. She'd been afraid that it would be everything she'd ever dreamed of, the most wonderful experience in the world, and that it would make marrying Robert so much harder than it already was.

"You found her. Oh thank God." It was her mother, her familiar voice an instant comfort to Bethany's troubled mind. "Come. I'll show you up to her bedchamber."

Charles's chest rose and fell against Bethany's cheek as he started walking. More so as he climbed the stairs. "I've requested a bath for her and some tea."

"Thank you. The quicker we get her out of those wet clothes the better."

A rough sound rose from Charles's throat. His hand moved to press her more firmly against him. Bethany's heart fluttered until he said, "Where's Langdon?" The question was a jarring reminder that she was drawn to the wrong man.

"When I saw him last he was in the library conversing with Mr. Hewitt." They reached the top of the landing and began making their way through a long corridor. "He realized Bethany wasn't here, and when he learned you'd gone out looking for her, he decided there was nothing else to do but wait for your return."

When Charles didn't comment, Bethany leaned her head back a little and glanced up at his face. Her breath caught in her throat on account of the anger she saw there – anger directed at Robert – anger on her behalf.

Her heart swelled as a new feeling started to grip her. It was like sunshine flowing through her veins to soothe away all her pain. It was love, pure and simple and utterly beautiful, yet heart-wrenchingly painful at the same time. She blinked away the wetness pooling against her lashes and bowed her head before he might see how destroyed she was.

Perhaps she should call off the wedding and risk whatever scandal might follow. She had her parents' full support, but could she really bring herself to do it? People had travelled far in order to be here, a huge expense had been invested, the settlement signed weeks ago, only so she could inform everyone that it was for nothing?

She wasn't so sure. Then again, the alternative would be to marry a man who would never see her as anything more than a necessary acquisition. A man she had no hope of falling in love with. Her heart trembled at the thought of having to see Charles when he came to visit, of eventually meeting the woman with whom he would choose to spend the rest of his life.

It was an impossible situation, made harder because of duty and responsibility. She could not stand the idea of marrying Robert any longer, but neither could she hurt his reputation by being the woman who jilted him at the last second.

Not knowing what to do, Bethany let her mother tend to her in silence. She'd felt Charles's reluctance when he'd set her down in her bedchamber. For a second after, he'd lingered, as if there were something he wished to say but wasn't sure how to express. In the end, he'd simply wished her well and departed, his stiff stride and clenched fists suggesting that a conflict similar to hers was playing itself out in his head.

"If only you were marrying Mr. Townsbridge instead," her mother said while she helped Bethany undress. "He's far more attentive than Robert and seems to genuinely care for you." A pause followed and then her mother added, "He's also heir to a viscountcy. I've inquired a little about his circumstances and have learned that he's independently wealthy and—"

"What you're suggesting would destroy Robert's reputation and

ours. He would forever be known as the man who was thrown over by his fiancée and betrayed by his friend. His only recourse would be to challenge Mr. Townsbridge to a duel and..." Bethany shook her head, the idea of either man possibly dying because of her too painful to even consider.

"I'm sorry," her mother murmured as she helped her put on a dressing gown.

Bethany sighed and stepped closer to the fire, warming herself as she waited for the footmen to arrive with the tub. "It's not your fault. You encouraged me to do what you believed was best for me at the time, and I agreed with you. It's just incredibly bad luck that I did not meet Mr. Townsbridge sooner." She forced a smile and glanced at her mother. "But I am hardly the first to marry for the sake of convenience."

"True. But I never would have supported the idea if I'd known how miserable you'd be."

"I have no intention of being miserable, Mama. One way on the other, I will find the means to be happy. Of that I can assure you."



"YOU LOOK LIKE A WRECK," James said when he happened to find Charles enjoying a moment of solitude and a much needed drink in the upstairs gallery. After changing his clothes, he'd endured dinner, conscious of Bethany's absence from the table. Her mother had, without any prompting on his part, mentioned that she slept and that she showed no signs of ailment at present. She'd thanked him again for his help in finding her and bringing her back to Langdon House, for which both she and her husband were incredibly grateful.

Sitting on the floor with his legs stretched out before him, Charles looked up at James, snorted, and took another sip from the bottle of brandy he'd brought along with him. "What can I say? I'm having a bad year." The brandy felt good as it heated his insides, easing the tension he'd been feeling for most of the day.

James frowned. "It's not like you to get foxed. Especially not while you're a guest under someone else's roof." He paused for a second, then asked, "What's going on, Charles?"

Charles grinned and let his head fall back against the wall. "It's a mess, James. The biggest bloody mess I've ever encountered, and I don't know how the hell to get out of it."

“What are you talking about?”

Taking another swig from the bottle, Charles contemplated confiding in his brother, but changed his mind quickly. “It’s not your burden to bear.”

James took a deep breath. “You’re making no sense, which shouldn’t really surprise me. Was that bottle full when you came up here?”

“I don’t remember.” Charles tilted his head. He could hear footsteps approaching. *Christ*. All he wanted was some time to himself.

“There you are,” Athena said. Her pace slowed as she took in the scene. “Lady Pratchard asked me to tell you that her daughter has awoken from her nap and appears to be feeling much better. She says there’s no sign of fever and that she expects her to be completely recovered by tomorrow.”

Relief flooded Charles’s veins, and he expelled a deep breath. “Thank you for letting me know. I appreciate that.”

Athena’s brow puckered. She glanced at James and then back at Charles. “Why are you sitting on the floor?” She drew closer. “Are you in your cups?”

“Barely,” Charles murmured. He set the bottle to his lips once more and took a long sip.

Athena gasped. “You are!” And then her expression twisted with what could only be described as a mixture of sadness and compassion. It tore at Charles’s gut and only made him all the more eager to drink himself into oblivion. “You have to tell her how you feel.”

Charles sputtered, almost choking on his drink. “What?” The word was violently spoken and caused his sister to flinch.

“How he feels about whom?” James prompted.

Athena sighed. “About Lady Bethany.”

“Athena,” Charles warned, his voice slightly strangled by fear and by the result of too much brandy.

She seemed not to hear him as she turned to James. “Charles is in love with her. Why no one else seems to realize this is completely beyond me.”

Gaping at his sister, Charles fleetingly wondered if he ought to strangle her right then and there, or smother her with a pillow later. “You’re wrong,” he muttered, sounding not the least bit convincing.

“Good God,” James said. “Does Robert know?”

“No he bloody well doesn’t, and neither of you is going to tell him or anyone else for that matter.” Somehow, Charles managed to hoist himself upright. He leaned back against the wall for a second to steady himself. “You will not interfere. Do you hear me?”

“But,” Athena began, “you cannot—”

“I will never forgive you if you do.” Charles glared at her, willing her to understand the consequences if she did something stupid – like mention this conversation to someone else.

“Does she feel the same about you?” James asked.

Charles raked his fingers through his hair and glanced up at the ceiling. His soul felt heavy, and his heart crushed beneath its weight. “I believe so.”

“Then you’ll both be unhappy,” Athena said, passionately stating the obvious. “Surely there must be a way to prevent that. Surely the three of us can come up with some idea together.”

He loved how much she cared about him. Too bad it wouldn’t help. “Not without hurting Robert, and that is not something that I am prepared to do. He’s my friend. We’ve known each other forever. So I would rather be miserable for the rest of my days than steal his fiancée from him.”

“But what about Lady Bethany?” James asked. “If she loves you instead of Robert, won’t she be miserable too?”

“Most likely. At least in the beginning.” He regretted it had to be this way, but he could see no honorable way out. “Time will help her adjust, and once she has children to dote on, doing so will be easier.”

“It’s not fair,” Athena pronounced.

“Robert’s a good man. He may not be right for Lady Bethany, but he is the one she has chosen to marry, and I must accept that. So must she.”

James and Athena both stared at him with perplexed expressions. “You shouldn’t have to,” James said. “You deserve to be happy, Charles.”

“Perhaps, but not at Robert’s expense.” He pushed himself away from the wall and handed the bottle of brandy to James. “Please make my excuses downstairs.”

“Where are you going?” Athena asked.

“To bed.” With any luck he’d sleep for the next ten years and have no memory of Bethany or Robert when he finally woke. A



smile tugged at the edge of his mouth. Now there was something to hope for.



BETHANY'S WEDDING DAY arrived before she was ready. During the days leading up to it, Robert had taken the time to walk with her in the garden. He'd even joined her for a game of chess one afternoon and had asked the cook to prepare duck for dinner when he'd learned that it was her favorite meal. He was starting to make an effort, for which she was grateful, but no matter how much she wished it, there was still no spark between them. Worst of all, she sensed that in spite of the increased attention he gave her, he was bored in her company and would rather be somewhere else.

Stepping down from the carriage in front of the church, Bethany gazed up at the bright blue sky. Birds were chirping in a nearby tree, and the sun was casting a vibrant glow on the world. Everything was peaceful, save for the frantic beating of her heart.

"You're certain?" her father asked her.

She nodded. "Yes." The banns had been cried and everyone was waiting. There could be no turning back. So she placed her hand on her father's arm and allowed him to guide her up the steps and into the church. It was packed to the brim, all heads turning to face her the moment she stepped through the door. Swallowing, she took a step forward and hoped that no one would see how unhappy she was.

Robert stood at the end of the aisle. He was waiting with Charles by his side, and for a fleeting moment, Bethany allowed herself to imagine that this day was different and that she was walking toward the man she loved, about to marry him instead of his friend. Feeling her eyes begin to sting in response to the intensity with which Charles watched her, she fixed her gaze on a point just above Robert's head and told herself not to worry. She was doing the right thing after all. She was being honorable and loyal, even though it felt like a curse at the moment.

"Dearly beloved," the priest began, "we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

Bethany inhaled deeply while he continued. She was conscious of Robert's presence at her side, of her clammy hands holding the bouquet of flowers her mother had given her earlier, and of the

hushed silence filling the building as the priest spoke.

“First,” the priest said, “it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy name.”

A shudder raked Bethany’s spine. Tonight would be her wedding night. She didn’t know why she’d not yet considered this, but she did so now with a sudden rush of dread.

“Secondly,” the priest continued, “it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body.”

*Dear God. She would not survive this.*

“Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.”

The priest paused and Bethany closed her eyes. He would continue momentarily and move on to the point where she pledged herself to Robert forever.

A rustling sound informed her that he’d turned a page in his book of common prayer and was ready to proceed. She tightened her grip on the flowers. “I re—”

“Stop!”

The command sliced through the air, causing Bethany to turn with surprise. Athena had risen, her expression one of keen determination. Bethany sucked in a breath. Was this really happening? Had Charles’s sister just demanded a halt to the ceremony? She glanced at Robert, whose glower appeared to be cut from granite.

Charles took a step forward, toward his sister. “Don’t.” The word echoed through the air until it was overpowered by whispers as those present stared at the ensuing spectacle in disbelief.

“Sit down,” Lord Roxley hissed at his daughter.

Athena didn’t budge. “No,” she said instead, as courageous as the goddess for whom she was named. “Not when an irreversible mistake is about to be made.”

“Athena,” Charles practically snarled.

Heedless of him, Athena gave her attention to Robert. “Bethany

and Charles are in love with each other, but they are prepared to sacrifice their happiness for you, for the—" She squealed as her father grabbed her roughly by the arm and proceeded to lead her out of the church to the sound of murmured responses of outrage.

Bethany's body began to tremble. Athena had done what she and Charles had refused to do. She'd brought scandal crashing down over their heads. Worse, she'd shamed Robert in front of his family and friends. Bethany turned to him, unsure of what to say, but he wasn't looking at her. He was facing Charles.

"Is this true?" Robert asked him under his breath.

Charles didn't respond, but the truth was revealed in his eyes. And then, without warning, Robert drew back his arm and pushed it forward, punching Charles squarely in the face.

Bethany yelped and the priest protested profusely, but Robert merely straightened his jacket, allowed her one final look of disdain, and walked away. He left her, ignoring the guests who called to him for answers, ignoring his parents who begged him to stay, and simply disappearing out into the calm outdoors.

The noise rose as people demanded to know what was going on. Ignoring it, Bethany gave her attention to Charles. Blood stained the handkerchief he held to his nose. His eyes met hers, so serious and apologetic and yet so incredibly warm. "I don't know what to say. That wasn't supposed to happen." He lowered the handkerchief, and she saw that a bruise was rapidly forming right next to his nose. "I'm sorry."

She nodded, forcing away the lump in her throat. "Robert didn't deserve this."

"Neither do we." He glanced out at the crowd, and she knew right away what he must be thinking: news of this would reach London by nightfall. Tomorrow morning it would be in the papers.

"Bethany." Her mother's voice drew her attention away from Charles for a second. "We have to go pack. Remaining at Langdon House isn't an option."

"Of course." She glanced back at Charles. "As awful as it may seem right now, this may be for the best. Robert and I were ill suited for each other. He now has a chance to make a better match."

"I hope so."

"Bethany," her mother pressed, "we really must be going."

Bethany held Charles's gaze. She wasn't sure what she expected

from him at the moment, but some assurance that his sister had not just wrecked all their lives for no reason would be nice.

He shifted his gaze away from hers and addressed her mother. "If you and your husband permit, I would like to call on your daughter at your convenience."

"Of course." Lady Pratchard said. "We will return to London from here and will likely remain there for at least two weeks while we prepare to leave for our estate near Oxford."

"In that case, I expect to see you both again within a day or two." His serious gaze and absent smile reminded Bethany of the gravity of the situation. While she'd just been left at the altar by a man she'd known for only three months, Charles had most likely lost a lifelong friend.

No words could ever express how much that pained her on his behalf, so she simply nodded and accompanied her mother out of the building.

Langdon House was in chaos when they arrived. Carriages came and went, either bringing guests from the church or conveying them to their own homes. Footmen rushed about offering assistance with the luggage while Lord and Lady Darlington stood near the door, expressing apologies. Robert himself was nowhere in sight.

"I'm so sorry," Bethany told the Darlings. "Is there anything at all we can do to help?"

The marchioness gave a swift shake of her head. "No." She managed a faint smile. "As wrong as it was for Miss Athena to interfere, I believe she did you and Robert a favor. Especially if what she said is true."

"Thank you, my lady." Bethany waited while Lady Darlington and her husband exchanged a few words with her parents and then continued upstairs to her room in order to pack. She did so quickly and half an hour later, she and her parents left Langdon House, certain that they would never return.

"I share the marchioness's sentiment," Lord Pratchard said as the carriage rolled onto the main road. "My only regret is that things weren't ended between you and Robert sooner. I can only blame myself for that."

"I disagree with you, Papa."

"At least Miss Athena had the sense to put a stop to it, though I do believe she will pay dearly for her spontaneity at home. Her parents looked furious."

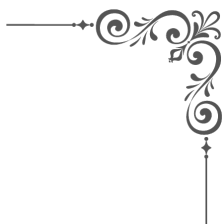
“So did her brother,” Bethany muttered. Now that the tumult had passed, she was able to reflect more clearly on what had happened and on how it had happened. “He distinctly asked her not to say anything.”

“And you worry this reflects a lack of investment in you on his part?” Her mother smiled with reassurance. “I would have liked him less, I think, if he hadn't attempted to prevent his sister from ruining his friend's wedding.”

“Robert will never forgive either of us.”

“No. But if things work out as I expect them to, you will gain a husband who cares about you instead of one who doesn't.”

As comforting as that thought was, Bethany still had her doubts. She would most likely become a pariah, which meant that if Charles wished to court her himself, he would have to risk additional scandal in order to do so.



## Chapter Five

AFTER LEARNING THAT Robert had taken a horse and ridden north, Charles went in pursuit. He found him in the taproom of an inn three hours later, no less angry than he'd been when he left the church.

"I have nothing to say to you," he snarled when Charles joined him at the table where he was sitting.

"Feelings cannot be so easily controlled," Charles ventured. "I never meant to fall in love with her. If anything, I did all I could to prevent it, but you kept pushing us together and—"

"Oh! So it's my fault is it?" The hurt in Robert's eyes shone brighter than the rage. He lowered his gaze to the table and gripped his tankard of beer. "You know about Charlotte."

"Yes, but Athena doesn't."

Robert's gaze shot back to his. "Is that supposed to be an excuse?"

Charles sank back against his chair with a sigh. "All I'm saying is that my sister acted without my consent."

"At least she had the courage to tell me the truth." Robert glared back at him, unblinking. "Damn you, Charles. You should have told me."

"To what end? You were already engaged to Bethany by the time I met her."

"I could have called things off. I could have managed the situation and minimized the scandal. But here we are instead. Neck deep in shit."

"I'm sorry, Robert. I—"

"You should probably go. I've nothing more to say to you."

"This isn't like Charlotte," Charles said, getting to his feet.

“Bethany's just a means to an end for you and she deserves better. So do you.”

Aware he'd pushed Robert far enough, Charles left the inn and headed for London. It felt like his clothes were made from lead, the weight heavy upon both body and soul.

Who knew what was right or wrong in this case? It was difficult to tell when he considered the situation from every angle. The best he could do now was make the most of the chance he'd been given. He'd claim the woman he loved and damn those who thought it was wrong.



SEATED AT HER DESK in her bedchamber, Bethany drew a prominent line across the page in her sketchbook, accentuating the roof of the house she was currently working on. She bit her lip and steadied her hand as she proceeded to add an ornamental detail above one of the windows. The elevation would soon be complete and then she would have to go back to the floor plan and make a few alterations.

She wrote some notes for herself at the bottom of the page and considered her work. It had provided her with a wonderful distraction since leaving Langdon. As expected, the circumstances of her broken engagement had been outlined in all the papers. Athena had been called a meddling harriidan who failed to know her place, while Charles was the man who coveted his friend's fiancée, and she herself an ungrateful woman whom the Earl of Langdon was likely better off without.

Everything had been twisted, and she was exhausted by the thought of having to correct the facts to anyone who happened to ask. So she'd stayed home for the last three days since her return to London, acutely aware of the fact that Charles still hadn't come to call. Whether or not he was even in Town, she did not know, but her heart ached every time she thought of him, for she missed him with an intensity so great it was hard to define.

A knock sounded at her bedchamber door, and she called for whoever it was to enter. Her mother stepped into the room. “How are you doing?” she asked as she went to sit on the edge of the bed.

Bethany turned in her chair so she could better face her. “I feel hollow inside.”

Her mother nodded. “The past few days have been tremendously

hard on all of us, but we cannot stay hidden away forever. It is time for us to make a public appearance.”

“No. I cannot.”

“You must.” She sighed. “If the *ton* sees you holding your head high, if they’re reminded of the good and kindhearted woman you are, perhaps they’ll realize the papers exaggerated their stories.”

Bethany snorted. “You do not honestly think that’s possible, do you? Society loves nothing more than salacious rumors.”

“Well, the alternative would be for you to remain in this room forever, and that is not a feasible option. Is it?”

“Mama...”

“The Townsbridges were all out yesterday afternoon in the park. We need to follow suit.” Seeing Bethany’s eyes widen, she added, “Mr. Charles Townsbridge was not with them, so I don’t think he has returned to London yet.”

“Thank you, Mama.” Bethany toyed with her skirt for a moment while gathering her courage. “Regarding this public appearance, what exactly are you proposing?”

“Miranda and her husband are hosting a ball this evening,” she said in reference to her childhood friend, the Countess of Westbrook. “I’ve asked her if we can put in an appearance and she has agreed.”

Bethany sucked in a breath. “A ball?” She would be forced to stand on the periphery of the ballroom while people whispered about her and gentlemen refused to ask her to dance. It would be humiliating.

“I suggest you pick out a gown, Bethany, and perhaps take a nap as well. We leave at eight.”

“Mama...” Bethany swallowed, her pulse now racing with trepidation. “Please don’t make me do this.”

Sympathy shone in her mother’s eyes, but her voice was firm when she spoke once more. “Your father and I have given our support where Mr. Townsbridge is concerned. This is what we are asking of you in return.”



CHARLES WAS EXHAUSTED and thoroughly disgruntled by the time he arrived at the Townsbridge home in Soho Square. He’d ridden his horse so hard it had lost a shoe. Rain had followed, forcing him to take yet another overnight stay, and finally, repairs



on a bridge had added further delay by making him change his route. The journey which ought to have taken no more than a day had ended up taking three. He could barely imagine what Bethany must be going through in his absence, the doubt that would surely be worrying her mind.

"I need a bath," he told the butler while peeling off his gloves in the foyer. His clothes were filthy and he equally so.

"I shall see to it straight away, sir."

The parlor door opened and his mother appeared. "Charles!" She came toward him as if meaning to embrace him, but halted as she scanned his ruffled appearance.

He grinned. "I wouldn't come any closer, Mama, but it's good to see you too."

She smiled briefly before turning serious. "The papers have not been kind to any of us."

He wasn't surprised. "How is Athena coping?"

"She's unrepentant, completely convinced she did what was right and that it's the rest of the world who is in the wrong."

The edge of Charles's mouth lifted. "I can't say I don't agree with her." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I hope she hasn't been punished too severely for what she did?"

"Your father has asked her to re-read her book on proper etiquette and decorum. She will write an essay on this and be denied the pleasure of enjoying Cook's *éclairs* for a full month."

"Oh dear." Charles grinned. "I will go and look in on her briefly before I take my bath."

"I'll let everyone else know that you have returned." She smiled at him. "Will you be calling on Lady Bethany later?"

"Yes. I have to reassure her of my intentions."

"Which are to court her, I presume?" When he nodded, she answered with warmth in her eyes. "You have our full support, Charles. Lady Bethany will make a fine addition to this family."

He barely managed a "Thank you" before his throat closed up with raw emotion. It meant the world to him that his family was willing to back him and face the additional gossip he would likely incur.

Parting ways with his mother, Charles climbed the stairs and turned right at the top of the landing. After passing his own bedchamber, he arrived at Athena's. He entered after a quick rap on the door and her permission to do so.

"How are you?" he asked when she stared at him mutely from her position on the bed. Stretched out on top of the counterpane, she held the book of etiquette in her hands.

"All right, as long as you don't hate me for what I did."

"I could never hate you, Athena."

She drew in a breath. "You said you would never forgive me if I interfered. You looked so angry in the church, and then Papa dragged me out. He yelled at me and said I'd ruined my chance of ever finding a husband."

"You're still young so there's plenty of time for that. I believe Papa was in shock. Indeed I know I was." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "What you did... It wasn't what I wanted at the time."

"Only because your conscience wouldn't allow it." She gave a thin smile. "I knew this, which is why I decided to act in your stead. You and Bethany love each other. To live with the knowledge that neither of you would be happy, your lives ruined for the sake of avoiding a bit of scandal—impossible for me to accept. I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Charles opened the door, turned slightly, and prepared to leave. "Robert said you're courageous and I quite agree."

"Will the two of you be able to work things out and save your friendship?"

"I'm not sure."

She said nothing further and Charles left her room so he could go take his bath. He was clean, dressed, and freshly shaved one hour later when he left to call on Bethany. But when he arrived at her home, he was told that she and her parents had gone to the Westbrook ball. Charles hesitated briefly. He hadn't thought to put on his evening attire for the sake of a social call. He also had no invitation.

Deciding that neither issue would stop him from seeing Bethany this evening and assuring her of his devotion, he gave his driver new instructions and climbed back into his carriage.



HAVING HEARD SEVERAL people whispering about her and being acutely aware of how quickly they moved away as she walked through the ballroom, Bethany found a chair near the wall and sat down, intent on remaining there for the rest of the evening. Her parents were both busy telling everyone who cared to listen about

their version of the events that had unfolded. Bethany loved them for making the effort even though she knew it was likely in vain.

“Are the rumors true?” A low voice murmured. “Did you and Charles Townsbridge conduct a secret affair behind Langdon’s back?”

Bethany stared up at the man who’d spoken, every nerve in her body on instant alert at the sight of Mr. Cavendish, the most notorious rake London had to offer.

Brilliant. This was going to improve things for her.

She clenched her jaw. “You ought to know better than to listen to gossip, sir. Most of it is false or at the very least grossly exaggerated.”

“So you’re still an innocent then?” Her mouth dropped open as his reason for seeking her out became clear. Heat scorched her cheeks. He nodded as if her expression said it all. “I shall leave you be then. Enjoy the rest of your evening, my lady.”

He strode away, leaving Bethany alone once more, this time with the awareness of just how thoroughly she had been ruined. She glanced at the dance floor, at all the hopeful young ladies with perfect reputations. Her heart clenched. At least if Mr. Townsbridge were here, she might not look quite so pitiful.

The music slowed and gradually faded. The dancers bowed and curtsied to each other before quitting the dance floor. A moment of silence passed and then the prelude to a new set started. A waltz. The most risqué of dances but also the most romantic.

Unable to stay and watch courting couples gaze into each other’s eyes while spinning about the floor, Bethany stood and prepared to go ask her mother if they could leave. She’d use Lord Cavendish’s approach as incentive.

But as she did so, a disruption occurred near the entrance. It swept toward her, carrying with it the man who’d captured her heart.

Charles.

His stride was determined, his expression intense. Dressed in beige buckskin breeches and a navy blue jacket, he looked out of place amidst all the evening attire, and yet there was no doubt in Bethany’s mind that he was the handsomest man in the room.

Coming to a halt before her, he held out his hand. “Dance with me, Bethany.”

Conscious of everyone’s stares and the fact that the music was

no longer playing, she focused on Charles, accepted his escort, and allowed him to lead her out onto the dance floor. But rather than release her so they could take their positions for the waltz, he turned to address the rest of the guests with her by his side.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, his voice clear and steady. “I know most of you disapprove of us being here, that some will never forgive the way Lady Bethany’s attachment to the Earl of Langdon ended. Our situation was a difficult one, for it pitched duty against the yearnings of the heart. And yet, we were prepared to sacrifice our love for each other in favor of avoiding scandal. But then my sister spoke up and opened everyone’s eyes to the truth, namely that Lady Bethany and the Earl of Langdon don’t care for each other, while she and I do. Which is why I intend to court her, marry her, and spend the rest of my life being thankful for the fact that my sister was braver than I was able to be.”

Nobody moved or uttered a word. They simply stared as if unsure of how best to respond. Bethany held her breath in anticipation, and then Charles spun her around, releasing her in the process.

Her skirt swooshed around her legs as she came to a halt, dazzled by his declaration and the promise of what was to come. Her gaze met his, steadying her even as it caused sparks of awareness to spiral through her. He gestured for the musicians to recommence playing, and as they did, he executed an elegant bow before sweeping her into his arms.

The moment he touched her, one hand holding hers, the other at her back, she felt the rest of the world slip away. It was just the two of them now, twirling around in the glow from a thousand candles.

“I’m so relieved that you’re finally here,” she confessed.

His hand tightened against her waist, heating the skin beneath her gown. “It was not my intention to keep you waiting, and I want you to know that I came as quickly as I could.” He gave a quick outline of his conversation with Robert and the difficult return trip to London that had followed.

“As much as I regret the way things ended with Robert, I don’t regret not marrying him,” she said, even as guilt’s painful hold on her conscience tightened. It was constantly present, reminding her that her happiness now came at another’s expense. “I love you, Charles. You are the man with whom I want to spend the rest of my life, the man with whom—”

She wasn't allowed to finish, for he drew her so roughly against him that she gasped, one second before he captured her mouth with a kiss.

Heedless of the additional gossip they were going to incur, she kissed him back with fervor. It didn't matter that they were in the middle of a ballroom or that London's elite was watching. All that mattered at that moment was them and their need to convey how they felt for each other.

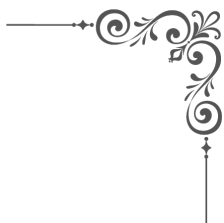
"You taste so damn good," he murmured against her lips as he drew away slightly. His nose nudged hers, causing her to smile.

"So do you." They'd stopped dancing at some point, even though the music still played and a few other couples continued to waltz around them.

Charles inhaled deeply. His eyes sparkled as they gazed into hers. "Marry me, Bethany. Let me give you the life you deserve. Let me champion your dream of designing houses. Let me bask in your beauty and rejoice in your laughter while loving you every day for the rest of my life."

She could scarcely breathe, let alone speak, so she nodded instead even though she knew it wasn't enough. After what he'd just said, he deserved to hear her. So she took a deep breath.

"Yes," she gasped as her lungs filled with air. "I will be your wife, your friend, your lifelong companion, and I shall love you until I draw my last breath."



## Chapter Six

AFTER SOME DELIBERATION, Bethany and Charles decided to have a small wedding with only their closest family present. Even so, Bethany's heart picked up its pace when the priest asked if anyone opposed their union. She almost expected Robert to burst through the door and shame her just as he had been shamed four weeks earlier. But he didn't, allowing her and Charles to bind themselves to each other without interruption.

They returned to Pratchard House after the ceremony to enjoy the wedding breakfast Bethany's mother had prepared in conjunction with Charles's mother. This lasted longer than Bethany had expected it to, but even as she longed to depart and begin her new life with Charles, she savored the joy she found with both of their families.

"Happy?" Charles asked when they finally headed toward their new home. Since proposing to her, he'd bought a townhouse – a temporary solution until she designed the perfect home for them, and they arranged to have it built.

"Ecstatic." She leaned in to him, loving how secure she felt in his arms. Tilting her chin up, she curled one hand around the back of his neck and drew him down for a kiss.

He nipped at her lips, gently at first and then with increased fervor as she twisted around in order to face him more fully. His arm tightened around her, drawing her closer. A rumbling sound rose from his throat, humming through her body, and causing her to sigh with extreme pleasure.

"Bethany." Her name whispered across her skin in the sweetest caress.

Sparks danced through her limbs as she grew increasingly eager

for more.

The coach rocked to a halt, and Charles kissed her hard, conveying the urgent need he felt and a promise of what was to come. Slightly dazed, Bethany clasped his hand so he could help her alight. He escorted her up the front steps of the house, opened the door, and guided her into the foyer.

The door closed behind them, and Charles leaned against it, studying her like a wolf salivating over a lamb. Eyes blazing with desire, he watched intensely as she peeled off her gloves and removed her bonnet.

“Christ, Bethany. The things I want to do to you...”

Heat flared to life in her belly before dipping lower. Her lips parted and he grinned, not with humor but with sinful intent. He came toward her then, so he could whisper close to her ear. “Would you like me to show you the stars?”

Breathless, she could only murmur, “Yes.”

With a rough, throaty sound, he swept her into his arms and carried her up the stairs. The bedchamber was sparsely furnished and still bore signs of a new room in need of a personal touch. But there would be time for that later. For now, the only thing on Bethany’s mind was the fact that she was about to make love to her husband. And while she wasn’t precisely nervous, she wanted to get it right.

This concern, however, was pushed right out of her head when, upon setting her down, Charles immediately shrugged off his jacket. Eyes holding hers from beneath hooded eyelids, he removed his waistcoat next and then went to work on untying his cravat. Bethany watched, her mouth going dry as the long piece of linen came loose. Exhilaration charged through her as it slowly slipped away to reveal the bare skin beneath.

She licked her lips and his eyes darkened. “Would you like me to take off my shirt?” he asked in the wickedest voice she had ever heard.

“Please.”

A low chuckle escaped him as he pulled his shirt loose from his trousers. “Your wish is my command.” And then he drew the garment over his head and tossed it aside.

Bethany sucked in a breath and unwittingly stepped toward him, her hand already seeking to explore the hard planes of his chest and the muscles that flexed in his arms. Her fingertips touched him,

drawing a hiss from within his chest.

Swallowing, she allowed her palm to settle more firmly against him, to slide over his skin in a hungry attempt to map every rise and fall of his gorgeous physique. Leaning in, she pressed a spontaneous kiss to his chest and was instantly caught in his arms. The embrace was rough, the kiss he gave her more so. His hands were suddenly everywhere, tugging and pulling at her gown while he plundered her mouth with his.

Cool air breathed over her skin as her clothes fell away, each item discarded until she was utterly naked. She wasn't as shy about that as she'd thought she might be. Least of all when Charles sought the more intimate parts of her body. Wanton that she was, she pressed herself into his touch. There was something she craved, and she sensed he would make sure she got it.

"You drive me mad, you know." His hands drifted over her skin, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. A gasp escaped her and he chuckled, low and seductive. "So beautiful and responsive."

Stepping back, he guided her to the bed and waited for her to get settled against the pillows before removing his shoes. His hose followed and then his hands went to the fall of his trousers, undoing the buttons. "You have a glorious body," he said as he pushed his trousers and smalls down over his hips and legs, kicking them aside so that he was as naked as she. "The effect you have on me..." He grinned with roguish abandon. A mixture of love and desire flashed in his eyes. "You can see it for yourself."

Trepidation swept through her as she beheld his virility, his strength, his pure masculinity. It must have shown, for the hunger in his gaze dimmed a little and adoration rose to the surface. "Don't worry. You and I will fit together perfectly." He climbed up onto the bed and nudged his knee between her thighs. "I'll be gentle with you. I promise. Though there might be a little discomfort the first time, it will pass, and after that all you'll know is pleasure."

As if to remind her of how much she'd liked his touch earlier, he caressed her until she was practically begging for him to claim her. Distracting her with soothing kisses, he carefully joined his body with hers. She gasped when he breached her maidenhead, causing him to pause until she relaxed. And then a new sensation took over – a restless desire to move.

As soon as she pulled him closer, he responded, guiding her in a timeless rhythm reserved exclusively for lovers while showing her



how to reach for the stars. She raced toward them while shouting his name, and he responded with a groan of pleasure as a shudder ripped through him. Breathing heavily, he braced himself above her and smiled with pure adoration. “God, I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said with a smile. Withdrawing from her, Charles settled on the bed beside her and drew her into his arms. The tender kisses he placed on her shoulder expanded her heart and filled it with warmth, reminding her just how right they were for each other and of how lucky they were to be husband and wife.



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR taking the time to read the first book in my Townsbridge novella series. If you enjoyed *When Love Leads To Scandal*, you'll definitely enjoy The Honorable Scoundrels novella series as well, starting with [The Governess Who Captured His Heart](#). These books are only \$0.99 each, so grab your copy today!

And don't miss [No Ordinary Duke](#)! This is the first book in The Crawfords series and features a duke who just wants to live a normal life and a woman who despises the aristocracy. When sparks fly between them and she discovers his true identity, compromises must be made if they're to stand a chance of a happily ever after together.

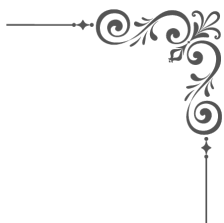
Or if you're looking for a longer read with a rags to riches trope, you might consider trying my Diamonds In The Rough series, starting with [A Most Unlikely Duke](#).

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Once again, I thank you for your interest in my books. Please take a moment to leave a review since this can help other readers discover my books.

And please continue reading for an excerpt of No Ordinary Duke





# **No Ordinary Duke**

## **Chapter One**

RAIN STREAKED DOWN the carriage windows while Caleb Maxwell Crawford traveled from the London docks to his family home on Grosvenor Square. Dusk had turned to night since he'd stepped off the ship on which he'd sailed from Calais yesterday afternoon. Jaw set, he tightened his grip on the leather satchel beside him on the bench. It held all the evidence he needed to prove how wrong his father had been when they'd parted ways ten years earlier. Filled with letters of praise and articles heralding Caleb's architectural abilities, it would show the old bastard he'd made a success of himself. It would prove that refusing to join the clergy and being cut off financially had not led to his downfall, as his father had claimed it would when he'd railed about Caleb's ungratefulness.

Peering out past the heavy rivulets of cascading water, Caleb narrowed his gaze on the murky darkness. He couldn't wait to gloat and see the astonished look on his father's face when he showed him the lithographs printed in the Paris Gazette. They illustrated in fine detail the mansion he'd designed for the Duke of Orléons. Building had commenced six years earlier and had just been completed last month. Inhaling deeply, Caleb tightened his hold on his satchel. The carriage drew to a jarring halt moments later, throwing him slightly off balance. Muttering a curse, he opened the door and climbed out into the unpleasant downpour, satchel in hand. The driver helped him retrieve his valise from the boot.

"Here you go sir," the man said while water streamed over the brim of his hat.

“Thank you.” Caleb paid him and walked toward the imposing Mayfair mansion that loomed before him. The heavy front door with its massive brass knocker was less than inviting.

Rain cascaded down the curved slope of the roof and pelted against the ground. Pulling his hat down over his forehead, Caleb drew the collar of his greatcoat up to protect the back of his neck and climbed the slick stone steps.

He still owned a key and withdrew it now from his pocket to unlock the door. It swung open and gave way to a dim interior. Entering the foyer, Caleb paused to listen. All was silent. Not even the longcase clock ticked away the progression of time.

Shivering, Caleb nudged the door shut behind him. It closed with a resounding thud. Where the devil was everyone?

Caleb sighed and muttered another oath. He didn't like the idea of having to hunt down his family at one of the country estates. But even if they'd left town, there ought to be servants about. His parents had never left a house completely empty.

A soft snick caught his ears, and then the sharp click of approaching footsteps filled the air. The sound accompanied a man who Caleb instantly recognized, even though his features were far more drawn now than when he'd last seen him.

“Murdoch,” he said, addressing the butler. “It has been a while.”

The old man drew a sharp breath. The candelabra he carried displaced the darkness. “I thought I heard something, so I came to investigate.” Moving closer, he peered up at Caleb. Light from four guttering candles flickered across his face, accentuating the creases there. “Is it really you, my lord?”

Caleb drew his hat from his head and swiped back the wet strands of hair that clung to his forehead. “Yes. I have returned.” He set his valise and satchel on the floor and proceeded to take off his gloves. “Where are my parents?”

Murdoch stared back at him as if he could still not believe he was actually there. “Your mother is upstairs in her rooms.” Breaking eye contact, he proceeded to help Caleb off with his coat.

“And my father, the duke?” When Murdoch failed to reply, Caleb knit his brow. “Is he not at home?”

“No, he is not.” The butler busied himself with hanging the coat and setting Caleb's hat and gloves aside. “But your mother will be pleased to see you, I'm sure. Please, follow me.” He led the way up the stairs while Caleb followed behind, his curiosity piqued by the

servant's unwillingness to supply him with details. Perhaps his parents had quarreled during his absence and were now living apart?

They reached the top of the landing and turned left toward the duchess's apartment. Caleb knew the way well enough, but was glad the butler would be there to announce his arrival. After all, he doubted his mother would be as pleased to see him as Murdoch believed, considering he'd left without saying farewell. But he'd been too angry to do so at the time, and his decision to leave had been made in haste without consideration for anything besides getting away.

Arriving in front of the door leading into his mother's sitting room, Murdoch paused to knock. A maid answered seconds later, her eyes widening when she noticed Caleb.

"Please inform Her Grace that her son, Lord Caleb, is here to see her," Murdoch said.

The maid nodded and the door closed, only to be opened again moments later by the duchess herself. "Thank God you are here!" She stared up at him with shimmering eyes, and then, in the next second, her arms were around him and she was holding him to her as if he offered necessary support.

Unaccustomed to such a display of affection from his mother, Caleb hesitated briefly before wrapping his arms around her as well. He hadn't expected such a warm welcome and was slightly thrown by the effect it was having on the resentment he'd harbored for the past ten years.

Placing a kiss on his mother's cheek, he listened to her uneasy breaths until she was ready for him to release her.

"Shall I have some tea sent up?" Murdoch asked, reminding Caleb of his presence.

"Please do," his mother said. She opened the door to her sitting room wider and invited Caleb in. Unlike his mother, whose youth had departed during his absence, the space looked unchanged. "Come sit with me, Caleb. There is much for us to discuss."

He wasn't even sure where to begin. This reunion wasn't going at all the way he'd imagined it would. Since leaving Paris five days earlier, he'd pictured himself storming into his father's study and shoving the evidence of his success under the man's haughty nose. Now, inhaling deeply, he approached the sofa and lowered himself to the vacant spot beside his mother. There was so much to say. Too

much, in a way.

Perhaps the best place to start was with an apology. "I am sorry," he told her and reached for her hand. "I should have written to you but the more time passed, the more difficult it became."

"I know."

He looked at her and was swiftly accosted by guilt at the sight of her watery eyes. Christ, he'd been awful to her. She hadn't deserved it, but his pride had been wounded, and he'd only been able to think of himself and of getting away from the life he'd come to despise.

"At least I am not your only son," he murmured. She had three besides his older brother, George, the heir who'd received all their father's affection.

"You haven't been in touch with Griffin or Devlin?" she asked in reference to the brothers who'd been born only minutes after himself. He shook his head. "They left shortly after you, for similar reasons, I suspect. Now, after everything that has happened, I am hoping they will return as well. I've sent out letters, but it will take time for them to reach your brothers." She met his gaze. Her brow puckered ever so slightly. "I'm surprised you are already here since I had no idea of your actual location. I suppose the agent I hired to find you was good at doing his job."

Unease traversed Caleb's spine. He tightened his hold on his mother's hand. "No one came to find me, Mama. I returned of my own accord."

"But then..." She swallowed and closed her eyes. Her lips trembled and it became suddenly clear to Caleb that she was making a stoic effort to maintain her composure. "You do not know." The words were only a whisper.

"Know what?" he asked even though he sensed he had no wish to hear whatever it was she would say in response.

"Your father is dead, Caleb. A fire broke out at the Everly stables last week," she said, referring to one of the dukedom's larger properties. "He and George went to inspect some repairs. They were supposed to be gone only for a few short days but now..." A sob cut off her words, and her free hand rose to smother the sound.

Caleb's heart thudded against his chest. "And George?" he asked, already dreading her answer.

"When your father didn't come out, George went in after him." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "They're both gone, Caleb. I

buried them at St. George's this morning."

It was as if time slowed to a halt. A distinct feeling of disappointment and deep regret trickled through him, numbing his veins. Slumping back, he tried to make sense of it, to accept what his mother told him as fact, only to find that he couldn't.

The door opened after a quick knock, and Murdoch returned carrying a tray. He placed it on the table, exchanged a few words with the duchess, and departed once more. Caleb's mother withdrew her hand from Caleb's and dabbed at her eyes. She then busied herself with pouring tea while he watched with a strange sense of detachment.

He shook his head. "No. It cannot be true."

She sniffed and took a sip of her tea. "You know what this means," she said, as if he'd not spoken. She waited for him to meet her gaze in question before saying, "You are the Duke of Camberly now."

Caleb stared at her in dismay. "I don't want to be." It was the first thing that came to mind. He liked his uncomplicated life, free from all the responsibilities his father and older brother had faced. He'd never envied either of them. But he had cursed the way his father's sense of duty and obligation had affected his life.

"Unfortunately, that hardly matters. With your father and brother gone, the title falls to you."

He instinctively shuddered and bit back the comment that threatened. To say that he ought to have stayed away would only cause his mother pain. She was happy to have him home and probably quite relieved with the prospect of him taking over the day-to-day running of things. And for her he would do it, or at least he would try.

He drew a deep breath and felt his chest tighten. "Very well. But if I am going to do this, I will need something stronger than tea. Please tell me you still keep a bottle of sherry in that cabinet over there."

Her wobbly smile tilted as if trying to find its balance. "Yes. I dare say I could do with a glass myself."

Raising her hand to his lips, Caleb pressed a tender kiss to her knuckles before going in search of their fortification. He was conscious of his heart beating a dull tattoo, like a drummer marching him off to the gallows. Recalling the satchel he'd left downstairs, he closed his eyes briefly and muttered a curse.

Everything he'd worked for these past ten years had been for nothing. His father would never know of his success. How ironic that the son he'd named his greatest disappointment would now be continuing his legacy.

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AS HAD BECOME HIS HABIT in recent weeks, Caleb arrived at White's shortly after nine in the evening to enjoy a drink and possibly a game of cards with his friend, Robert Moor, Viscount Aldridge. The two had known each other since childhood and had been sent off to Eton together as lads. The moment Caleb's return to London had been announced six months ago, Robert had immediately come to call, and the two had spent an hour washing away the years wedged between them with a few glasses of brandy.

Since then, Robert had offered invaluable advice and support. He'd invited Caleb out for rides and to Gentleman Jackson's boxing saloon whenever he'd needed to lose himself in something besides accounts, ledgers, investments, and his mother's most recent obsession – his need to think about marriage.

He'd cut her off and walked away the first time she'd made the suggestion and every time since. But when the Season had been well underway and she'd shown up with a list of potential candidates she considered appropriate for courtship, he'd had no choice but to listen, even though he detested the extra pressure it placed on his shoulders.

"You look more somber than usual," Robert said when Caleb found him. "Trouble with the dukedom?"

Dropping into a vacant chair, Caleb frowned at his friend, who poured a large drink and handed it to him. Caleb took a long sip, enjoying the powerful flavor and the heat it exuded as it slid down his throat. "I cannot stand it any longer." Leaning back, he cradled the glass between his hands and stared at his friend as if he had the power to save him. "It is awful, Robert. I just..." He sighed and scrubbed one hand across his jaw. "I hate being a duke."

Robert had the decency not to argue. Instead, he watched, his eyes increasingly somber until he finally said, "Then don't be."

Startled by the comment, Caleb grinned, the expression so foreign to him now it actually hurt his jaw. "As if it's that simple, but you know as well as I that it is not."

His friend inclined his head, paused for a moment as if on the

verge of divulging some piece of information, but then set his own glass to his lips and drank. "Is it not getting any easier?"

Caleb thought back on the endless hours of work that held him hostage in his study. There had been little reprieve and no time at all to consider his own wants and needs since his return. Even now, the satchel holding his architectural designs remained unopened. He'd had no opportunity to share them with anyone or to dream up new ones.

"No," he told Robert with unwavering honesty. "If anything, it is getting worse. The demands on me are increasing with each passing day. Women I've never met are showing up at my home, intent on praising their daughters's charms. Meanwhile, every business in Town is paying me court, and every hostess wishes to make me her guest of honor. And that's not considering repairs I am asked to fund and approve at my various estates and the tenants who all have concerns they've decided to air in a steady stream of letters I receive daily."

Robert's lips twitched as if struggling to contain his laughter. He cleared his throat. "I see."

"Do you really?" Caleb wasn't certain. "You were groomed for this sort of life from the day you were born, while I was largely ignored until I was dropped in the middle of it."

"I also have the added benefit of being happily married to a woman who helps me endure the burden of the responsibility I carry." Robert considered Caleb for a long moment before saying, "Maybe your mother has the right of it. Perhaps marriage is precisely what you need."

Caleb groaned. "Don't be daft. The last thing I need at the moment is another female to coddle." He winced, aware he'd just referred to his mother in rather disparaging terms, but the truth of it was that as much as he loved her, her constant weeping and insistence he fill a mold he didn't quite fit had driven him to the point of madness.

"Then what do you need?" Robert stared him straight in the eye. "Do you even know?"

It took a moment for Caleb to turn the question over in his head and find the right answer. "Yes," he finally said. "I believe getting away for a while would help."

Robert studied him with increased interest. "Where would you go?"



Caleb snorted. "I have no idea. If I head to one of my country estates, all the problems I'm trying to escape will surely follow."

"So you want to go somewhere where you won't be bothered."

"Just long enough for me to find my bearings again." Because he could not believe this was all there would be to his life— now until he drew his last breath. There had to be more to it than sitting in a study and going over numbers. Somehow, he had to rediscover himself, recover from the shock of losing his father and brother, and find the means to stay true to himself while being a duke.

"Is your secretary capable of running things without you during this absence?"

"I believe so," Caleb said with conviction. The man had worked with his father for the past two decades. He knew everything he needed to know to handle things efficiently, which made Caleb warm to the idea of taking a break. Perhaps it would be more possible than he'd dared to believe.

"In that case, I have a proposal I'd like for you to consider." A smirk made Robert's mouth tilt with a hint of mischief. "I have a modest property in Cornwall. Clearview is its name. It's a decent place but the money I've sent for repairs has, as I understand it, been spent on other things."

Caleb frowned. "If you think your servants are stealing from you, it might be prudent to go and investigate the matter."

"And so I would if I had the time, but with Vivien's pregnancy, I am reluctant to leave her side at the moment, so I thought perhaps..."

Understanding dawned. "You want me to go in your stead?"

Leaning forward, Robert rested his elbows on his knees and pierced Caleb with a direct stare. "I believe a man like you who enjoys working with his hands might take pleasure in seeing to some of the repairs himself."

"You could be right," Caleb said. The prospect of mending a leaking roof or a crumbling wall held a lot of appeal. "I can also hire new servants for you, if you think that might be helpful."

A flicker of amusement brightened Robert's eyes. "There are no servants there, Caleb. Just my sister, her friends, and the orphaned children they offer sanctuary to."

Caleb blinked. "Your sister?" Robert had several, some younger, some older.

"Cassandra, to be exact. She's five years younger than us, so you

might not recall her. She debuted after you left England.” His expression cooled a fraction as he added, “She made the scandalous choice of bedding her fiancée before they were married. Poor devil died on his way to the church, struck down by an oncoming carriage.”

“Jesus!”

Robert nodded. “Cassandra sought my help shortly after. Apparently, that one indiscretion had gotten her pregnant. When she refused to pass her child off as another’s, which was what our parents advised, they threatened to turn her out of the house. So I secretly bought a place for her to live. When two other girls encountered similar hardships, Cassandra invited them to come with her. During the last five years, they have taken in several children, who cost more to keep than they can afford with the measly donations they receive from friends and family.”

“In other words,” Caleb said slowly, “these three spinsters are mismanaging funds in an effort to run a make-shift orphanage?”

“More or less,” Robert said with a shrug.

“And you have allowed this to continue for five years?” Caleb could scarcely believe it. It wasn’t that he didn’t approve of the kindness these women were showing toward the less fortunate, but if they let the house fall into complete disrepair, the day would come when they wouldn’t even have that. And then what?

“She’s my sister,” Robert said. “I have tried to help her as much as I can while keeping her scandalous circumstances at bay. She and her friends have been hidden away and mostly forgotten, but they are constantly in need of assistance, and I simply don’t have the time or the resources to keep ensuring they’re well looked after. I have my own family to consider, estates to tend to as well as investments and parliamentary responsibilities. You know how it is.”

Wasn’t that the truth of it? Caleb flattened his mouth and considered his choices: stay in London, tied to a desk and with endless demands placed before him, or ride off to Cornwall for a breath of fresh air and the physical activity awaiting him there.

He knew which he preferred, but there was still one problem. “It would be unseemly for me to live in a house with three unmarried women.”

“Spinsters, Caleb, not debutantes. Makes all the difference, you know. But I actually agree, which is why I suggest you stay in the

caretaker's cottage."

"There's a caretaker's cottage?" How big was this place?

"It's nothing to get excited over since it's only one room, but if you want to stop being a duke for a while and pretend you're a..." he waved his hand between them before settling on, "laborer instead, then you're welcome to it."

Uncertainty settled between Caleb's shoulder blades. "How come no one's living in this cottage right now?"

"Because the caretaker I hired to keep things in order had a massive row with my sister's friend, Mary Clemens."

"About?"

Robert sighed. "Using the funds I sent for repairing the roof."

Caleb gaped at his friend. "So this...Miss Clemens, is the real problem I take it?"

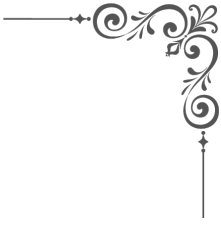
"She's part of it," Robert agreed. "She's certainly not afraid of speaking her mind. This is the third caretaker she's frightened off in just over a year."

Raising an eyebrow, Caleb stared at his friend. He was no longer entirely sure he was up to the sort of change he offered. "I will have to think about it." Long and hard and then a few times more to be absolutely certain.

But when he arrived home and found three Society matrons waiting for him with their very eligible daughters, Caleb quickly retreated to his study. He spent the next three hours discussing matters with his secretary and ensuring that the man was indeed capable and willing to handle all his affairs if Caleb chose to remove himself to the countryside for a while.

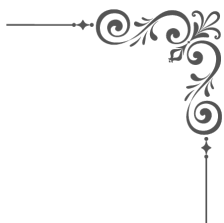
That settled, he went in search of his mother, who was not the least bit pleased with his decision. He understood her of course and promised he'd soon return, assuring her that when he did, he'd be ready to focus on finding a wife.

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## Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK the Killion Group for their incredible help with the editing, formatting and cover design of this book. And to my friends and family, thank you for your constant support. I would be lost without you!



## About The Author

BORN IN DENMARK, SOPHIE has spent her youth traveling with her parents to wonderful places around the world. She's lived in five different countries, on three different continents, has studied design in Paris and New York, and has a bachelor's degree from Parson's School of design. But most impressive of all - she's been married to the same man three times, in three different countries and in three different dresses.

While living in Africa, Sophie turned to her lifelong passion - writing.

When she's not busy, dreaming up her next romance novel, Sophie enjoys spending time with her family, swimming, cooking, gardening, watching romantic comedies and, of course, reading. She currently lives on the East Coast.

You can contact her through her website at [www.sophiebarnes.com](http://www.sophiebarnes.com)

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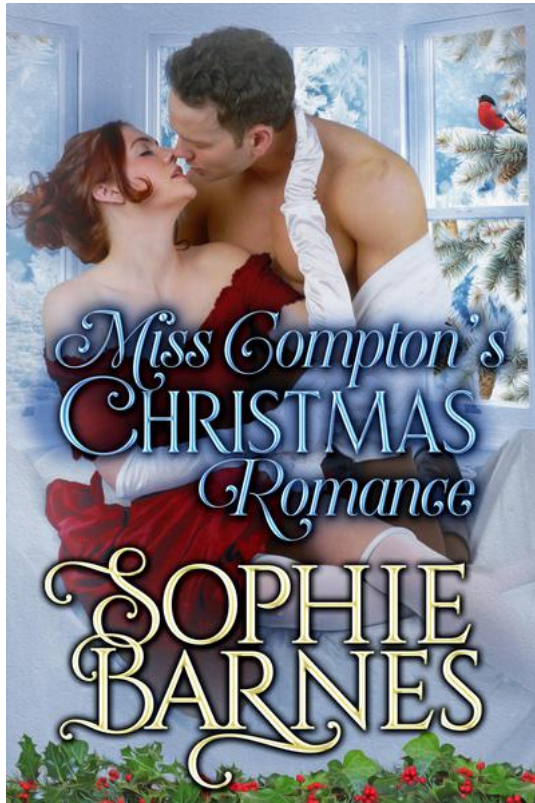
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When Philip believes his travel companion requires protection, he immediately steps in to help by pretending to be her husband. For although the last thing he wants is to form an attachment,

Philip is irrevocably drawn to the stunning red-head. And as they become better acquainted and their paths increasingly intertwined, he must decide if risking heartache again is worth the chance of finding true love.